



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

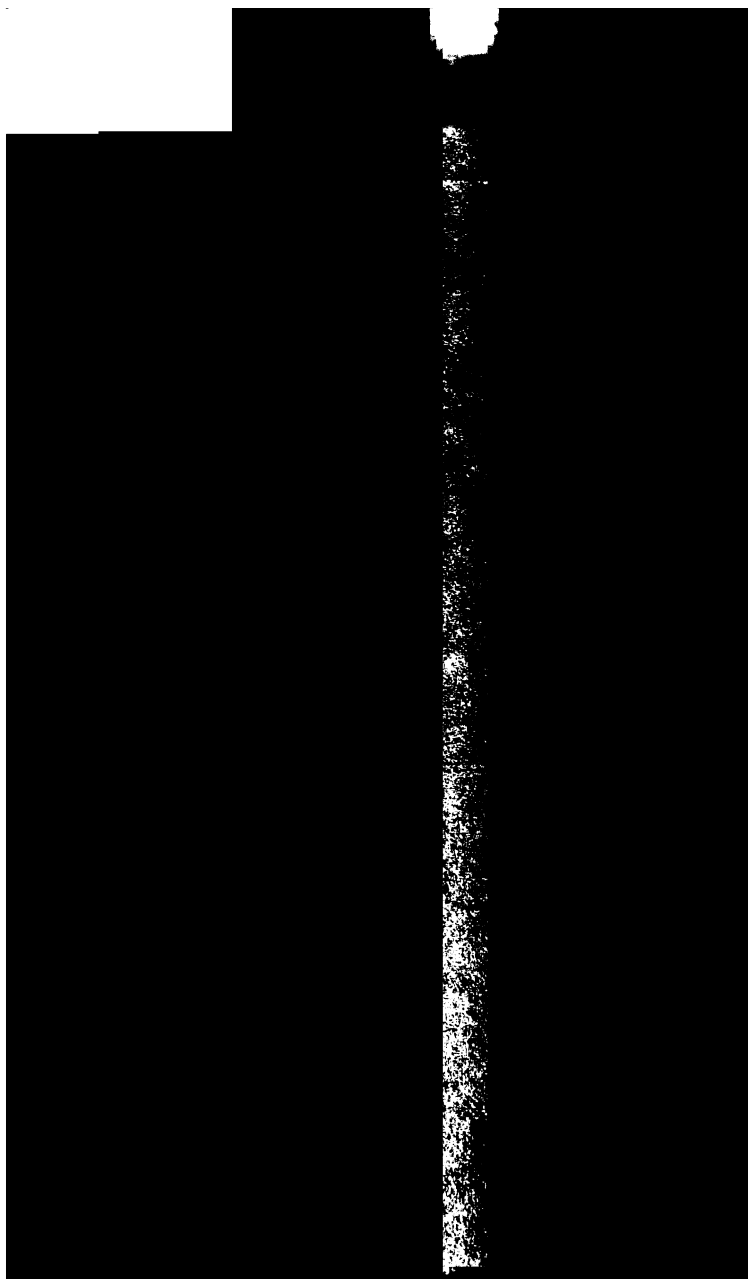
- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>



3 3433 07492919 5

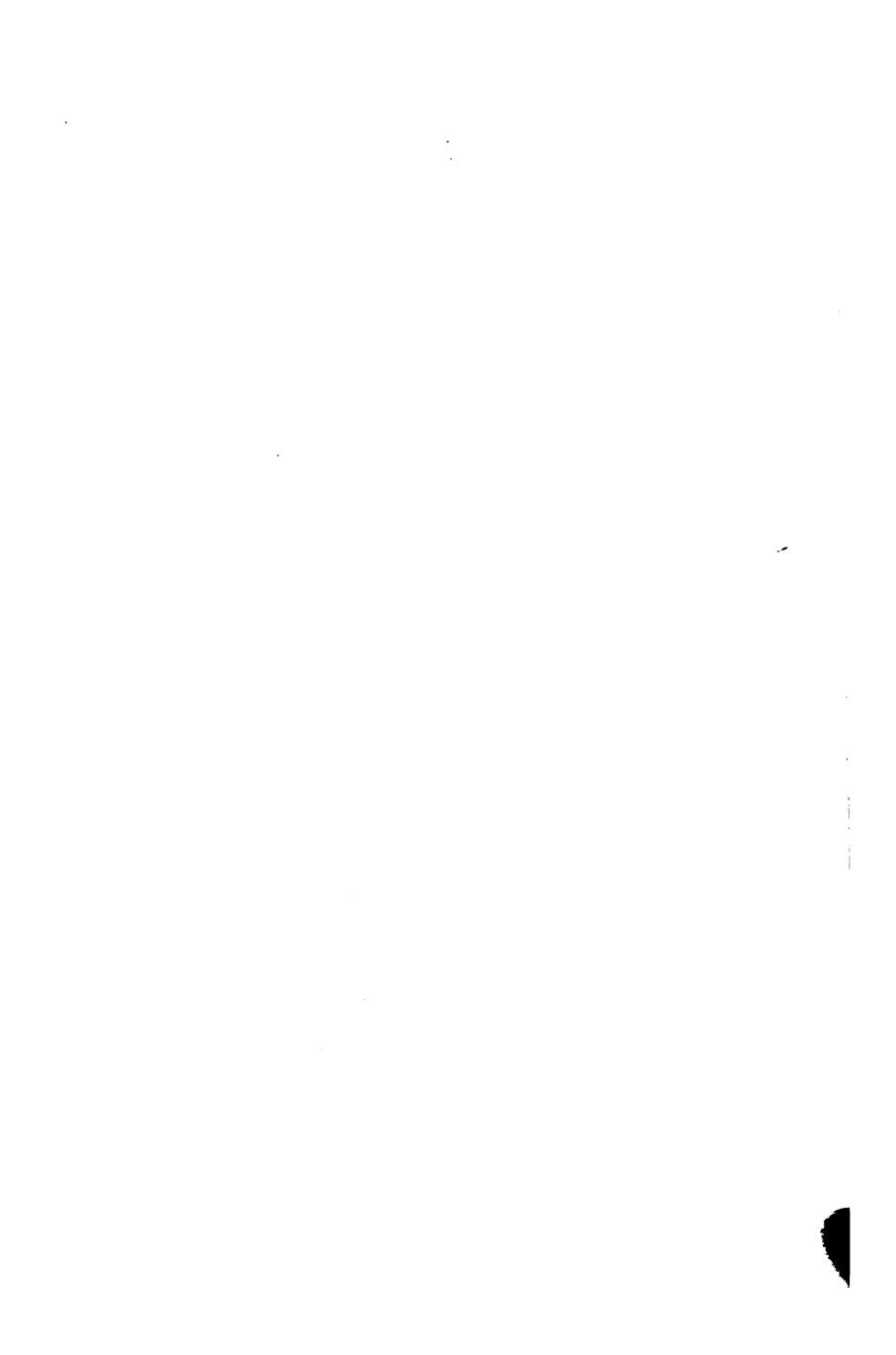


Braine

N.C.

434





A WOMAN'S TEMPTATION.

BY BERTHA M. CLAY.

(Brame)
NCW

POPULAR NOVELS
BY
BERTHA M. CLAY.

THROWN ON THE WORLD	\$1.50
A BITTER ATONEMENT	1.50
LOVE WORKS WONDERS	1.50
EVELYN'S FOLLY	1.50
LADY DAMER'S SECRET	1.50
A WOMAN'S TEMPTATION	1.50

All published uniform with this volume, and sent
FREE by mail, on receipt of price.

BY
G. W. CARLETON & CO., Publishers,
NEW YORK.

MERCANTILE LIBRARY ASSOCIATION
NEW YORK CITY

not in
3/24/25
LHP

A

WOMAN'S TEMPTATION

A NOVEL.

1

BY BERTHA M. CLAY,

AUTHOR OF

"THROWN ON THE WORLD," "LADY DAMER'S SECRET"

"A BITTER ATONEMENT," "EVELYN'S FOLLY,"

"LOVE WORKS WONDERS," ETC.

Charlotte Mary Frame

"Ah, Zelica! there *was* a time, when bliss
Shone o'er thy heart from every look of his;
When but to see him, hear him, breathe the air
In which he dwelt, was thy soul's fondest prayer!"

—Lalla Rookh.

237194.



NEW YORK:

G. W. Carleton & Co., Publishers.

STREET & SMITH, NEW YORK WEEKLY.

MDCCCLXXX.

Handwritten notes and signatures at the bottom of the page.

Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1880,
BY STREET & SMITH,
in the Office of the Librarian of Congress at Washington.

THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY

302535A

ACQUIRED FROM
THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

R

FRANCIS S. STREET, }
FRANCIS S. SMITH, } *Proprietors and Publishers*

OF THE

NEW YORK WEEKLY,

THE LEADING STORY AND SKETCH PAPER OF THE AGE.

NOV 10 1880

To
THE READERS OF THE
NEW YORK WEEKLY,

WHO FOR NEARLY TWENTY YEARS, HAVE STOOD FAITHFULLY BY US,

CHEERING US IN OUR LABORS, AND BIDDING US GOD-SPEED ;

TO WHOM OUR PET JOURNAL HAS BECOME A HOUSE-

HOLD WORD, AND WITHOUT WHOSE AID WE

COULD HAVE ACCOMPLISHED NOTH-

ING, THIS VOLUME IS RE-

• SPECTFULLY DEDI-

C A T E D

BY THE PUBLISHERS,

STREET & SMITH.

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER.	PAGE.
I.—“IF I COULD ONLY DIE AND END IT ALL.”.....	9
II.—“I BRING MY LITTLE DAUGHTER.”.....	15
III.—THE CHARGE ACCEPTED.....	22
IV.—A TERRIBLE MISTAKE.....	28
V.—MEETING HIS FATE.....	35
VI.—THE SCHOOL FETE.....	42
VII.—“TOO GOOD TO BE LOST.”.....	48
VIII.—“WHAT CAN IT BE ?”	55
IX.—VANQUISHED BY TEARS.....	62
X.—“TIME PROVES ALL THINGS.”.....	68
XI.—THE PASSING CLOUD.....	75
XII.—THE UNCLE’S REPLY.....	81
XIII.—WHAT SHALL HE DO ?.....	86
XIV.—“I SHALL DIE IF I LOSE YOU.”.....	92
XV.—“I WILL BE TENDER AND TRUE TO YOU.”.....	98
XVI.—“I WILL TRUST YOU ANYWHERE.”.....	103
XVII.—“I SHALL ALWAYS REMEMBER YOU.”.....	109
XVIII.—“SHE IS A NOBLE WOMAN.”.....	114
XIX.—“THIS WILL NOT BE DENIED ME.”.....	118
XX.—A HUSBAND’S SECRET.....	124
XXI.—“WHAT IS THERE IN STORE FOR ME ?”.....	130
XXII.—“I DID IT FOR THE BEST.”.....	136
XXIII.—“I HAVE GRIEVOUSLY SINNED.”	144
XXIV.—“SHE WOULD MAKE A GRAND LADY ARNCOURT.”...	151
XXV.—“I LIKE WORDS THAT ARE TO THE POINT.”.....	159
XXVI.—“HAS SHE A HEART ?”.....	167

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER.	PAGE.
XXVII.—“WHY SHOULD I NEVER TOUCH ANY HEART ?” ..	174
XXVIII.—“LOVERS’ QUARRELS ARE BUT THE RENEWAL OF LOVE.”	181
XXIX.—“DO NOT LOVE HIM.”	189
XXX.—“WOE TO ANYTHING THAT OPPOSES MY LOVE!”	195
XXXI.—“I LOVE YOU, ERIC !”	202
XXXII.—“HAVE YOU FOUND SUCH A ONE ?”	209
XXXIII.—“I DID NOT FIND MY IDEAL AMONG THEM.” ..	216
XXXIV.—“WHAT HAD SHE TO DREAD ?”	224
XXXV.—“YOU, ABOVE ALL OTHER MEN !”	232
XXXVI.—“YOU HAVE NOT DISPLEASED ME.”	239
XXXVII.—“WHY IS IT NOT ALL DIFFERENT ?”	246
XXXVIII.—“HOW LONG HAS HE LOVED HER ?”	254
XXXIX.—“I LOVE HIM BETTER THAN MY OWN LIFE.	260
XL.—“I MUST BE GENEROUS TO FORGIVE THAT.” ...	267
XLI.—“COULD YOU EVER HAVE LOVED ME ?”	274
XLII.—A LIFE OF TORTURE.	280
XLIII.—“I WISH SHE WERE DEAD.”	288
XLIV.—“IT WILL NEVER BE.”	296
XLV.—THE MIDNIGHT SURPRISE.	302
XLVI.—“WHO CAN BE GUILTY OF SUCH CRUELTY ?” ..	310
XLVII.—“WHO AM I TO WATCH ?”	318
XLVIII.—“HOW WAS HE TO FIND OUT BELLE’S ENEMY ?”	327
XLIX.—“HE WILL NEVER CARE FOR ME.”	336
L.—DISCOVERED.	345
LI.—CONFESSING HER CRIME.	354
LII.—“THAT WAS THE HOUR OF MY TEMPTATION.”	363
LIII.—“YOU WILL NOT FORGIVE ME ?”	372
LIV.—“YOU DESERVE ALL THE KINDNESS IN THE WORLD.”	381
LV.—“JUST WHAT LIFE HAS MADE ME.”	390

A WOMAN'S TEMPTATION.

CHAPTER I.

"IF I COULD ONLY DIE AND END IT ALL."

Madame de St. Lance sat alone in her own room, an apartment that long years ago had been the boudoir of the most beautiful and most noble the Duchess of Valentinois. Even in its wreck the room was wonderful. It was of an octagon shape, containing eight flower-wreathed windows, and each window had once been draped in the richest rose brocade—it hung there still, tattered and worn. The painted ceiling had lost its vivid coloring; the gorgeously decorated panels were chipped and broken. There was an English grate, with a magnificent marble mantel-piece, a mass of elaborate and beautiful sculpture, almost destroyed by wreck and decay; a small fire burned there now, and a lighted lamp stood on the table; yet neither drove away the look of desolation and grandeur in decay.

Madame de St. Lance had been reading, but the book,



Lamartine's "Genevieve," had lost all charm. She laid it down and walked to one of the windows; she unfastened it, and the rose-scented evening breeze came in. It refreshed her; it broke up the dead calm of monotony and despair that seemed to have settled upon her.

) How fair it was, that beautiful, fruitful land of France! How fair this flowery land of Provence, where the very air seemed freighted with perfume and music!—that calm, sweet Provencal night, with its myriads of golden stars, its bright-shining moon, its flower-laden breeze, its roses, lilies, and vines!—surely one of the fairest spots on the face of the beautiful earth.

The tired eyes gazed over the fair, sweeping land, while something of the calm of the moonlight came over the wearied heart.

"If I could only die and end it all!" said Madame de St. Lance. "Die and be buried in some quiet corner where the rose leaves might fall on my grave. Die and end the struggle that is worse than death."

To die! There are people who doubt the immortality of the soul; and yet, in deepest grief, in sorrow, in anguish, and despair, our thoughts turn to death, that key to another and brighter life.

"So few," murmured the lady, "live but for one hope. I have but one—my little Reine. Wealth, position, honor, land, title, husband, and friends are all lost, even the royal cause for which we suffered so severely is lost, and nothing remains to me but my daughter. I have heard wonderful

stories where a frail, delicate girl has restored the fallen honors of a good race; is it for that Reine has been spared to me?"

The idea, even while it aroused, cheered and soothed her. She closed the window and returned to her seat by the fireside.

Now that the lamp-light falls full upon her, one may see that there is some faint similarity between the lady and the room. She also looks like the wreck of some great and beautiful queen. She is a thorough aristocrat. She has the unmistakable air of the *grande noblesse*, that manner which no money can purchase, no art imitate; it only comes from the refinement of long generations. Looking at Madame de St. Lance one could tell that she was born of a noble race, that she had lived in the atmosphere of a court, that she had associated with the noble, the gallant, and the gay.

Her figure, tall, dignified, and well-developed, full of regal grace and dignity, is clothed in a dress of deepest mourning, a fitting dress for one who mourns a dead husband and a lost cause. No queen ever carried her state robes with more dignity, or looked more royal in them.

The lamp-light falls upon a grand face, one that in its youth must have been sparkling and lovely; a pure Norman face, oval in shape, delicate in contour, and exquisite in coloring. But the dark eyes, once so starry bright, are shadowed and mournful; the lips on whose smile the noblest of the land once hung enraptured are pale, and have

round them lines that tell of deep care and woe. The dark hair is brushed back from the white brow, and carelessly fastened; but the face, despite its beauty, has a look that in repose is almost terrible—the look of a restless soul, of a soul wearing itself away with bitter repining, with disconsolate weariness, and unendurable *ennui*; the soul of a brilliant, beautiful woman, born to shine, to exact homage, to rule and to sway, yet doomed to death in life.

The white hands that hold the book are perfect in shape and in color. They sparkled once with gems fit for a queen. Now one plain golden ring shines on them, and that seems in danger of dropping off.

Madame de St. Lance resumes her book, and the little clock chimes eight. She looked up and the weariness on her face deepened.

“Only eight; and each hour of this day has seemed to me like an age. What am I to do till eleven or twelve?”

It seemed almost like an answer to her question when a rap came to the door.

“Come in,” said madame, in her clear, rich voice; and there entered the old servant, Janette, carrying a tray in her hands.

“I trust madame will not be angry,” said the woman, as she placed the tray upon the table; then one quick, keen glance round showed her the desolate state of the room. She gave the fire a touch that provoked a merry blaze; she trimmed the lamp, and so nearly doubled the light.

"I noticed that madame hardly touched her dinner, and I have taken a liberty. I made a cup of coffee, and have brought a bit of white roll, with a bunch of our finest grapes ; and I pray madame to eat."

It had come to this !—she who had smiled while princes and nobles waited upon her with the daintiest of luxuries, was thankful for the *caré* and attention of this old servant.

Madame thanked the old woman in her grateful, dignified manner, and the servant withdrew.

Once more Madame de St. Lance was alone ; but the cheerless gloom and desolation had vanished ; the fire burned brightly ; the lamp cast a full, brilliant light on the painted ceiling and the old-fashioned tapestry ; the coffee yielded a fragrant aroma, and there was a fine purple bloom on the grapes.

It was but an humble meal, yet madame seemed to enjoy it. She ate the white roll and the grapes, reading the while ; then she drank the coffee. Its warmth and strength seemed to revive her.

"If I am to live and work for Reine," she said, "I must not starve myself as I have been doing. How little I knew of the weakness produced by mere physical want !"

Then madame sat with the fire-light playing on her black silk dress and her white hands. The sweet southern wind seemed to have died away, and there came the sound of a stronger breeze from the pinewoods—a wind that had something mournful in its sound.

She shivered as she heard it.

"It is a lonely place, this old chateau," she said, then suddenly paused, for the sound of carriage wheels fell on her ear, and she started up in wonder, not unmixed with alarm.

CHAPTER II.

"I BRING MY LITTLE DAUGHTER."

Madame de St. Lance heard the sound as of some important arrival. Inclination prompted her to run down and see what it was; dignity told her to stand quite still. Suddenly the door opened, and Janette, with less ceremony than usual, entered the room.

"Madame!" she cried, "a gentleman—an English milor, I am sure—asks the honor of seeing you."

Madame took the card and read the name.

"Lord Clancey." The name was quite unknown to her; but something of the old courtly grace that had once made her so famous came over her as she read.

"Ask the gentleman to walk up stairs, Janette," she said. "I will receive him here."

She saw Janette's eyes wander from the faded ceiling to the worn tapestry. She smiled.

"It is of no consequence," she said; "this room is not so cold as the others."

"The gentleman has a little child with him—a little girl. One would take her to be about four years of age."

"Good!" said madame. "Do not keep the gentleman waiting."

She was too proud to go, as some women would have gone, to the glass. She did not appear to bestow one thought upon herself—how she looked, or anything of the kind ; but she stood still, with a puzzled look upon her face.

“Clancey !” she said to herself ; “it seems to me that I have heard the name.”

She was looking back into the annals of that brilliant past, when she had received princes and peers in her gorgeous saloons.

“Clancey ! Have I heard the name, or have I only dreamed it ?”

As she stood there in the grandeur of her faded beauty, the wind wailing round the chateau, there came to her no warning of the great and terrible tragedy that was to be worked out in her life.

She looked up when her visitor entered—a young, handsome man, dressed in deep mourning, and leading a little child by the hand. He bowed low before the stately, dignified lady.

“Madame de St. Lance,” he said, in a low, well-modulated voice, “I can hardly hope that you remember my name.”

She smiled.

“I seem to have some vague recollection of it,” she said, quietly.

“I never had the pleasure of meeting you myself ; but

my uncle, the late Lord Clancey, of Neversleigh, was well known to the Comte de St. Lance, in Paris, ten years ago."

A sudden light came over her face.

"I remember," she said, "a tall, elderly gentleman, with white hair. He used to talk to us very often of his nephew and his heir, Mr. Ruthven."

"I was Mr. Ruthven, and I am now Lord Clancey," said the gentleman; "and, madame, I am come to solicit from you a great favor."

She bowed, and begged her visitor to be seated. He took a chair, still holding the child by the hand; then he placed it on his knee.

"I must first offer you, madame, my most earnest sympathy. I heard, years ago, of your terrible reverses."

"Yes," she replied; "we were true and loyal to a fallen cause. No reverse could have been greater than ours."

"You saved nothing, then, from the wreck?"

"Nothing," she replied. "Our estates were confiscated. They are divided now, and have passed into other hands. Our title is extinct, our name perhaps forgotten."

"It lives in the annals of France, madame," he said, sadly.

"Yes; but not in the minds of men. We saved from the vast possessions of the Lances but two things—our honor and my jewel-case." She smiled bitterly. "I had just time, while the mob surrounded the gates of the chateau, to get my jewel-case; it contained diamonds of great value. Some were sent to one of our ancestors by

Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia. There was a necklace of some value, given by an Empress of Austria. I saved those, but nothing else. We escaped to England, and sold them there. But for those jewels, Lord Clancey, we must have perished of hunger."

"It is terrible to think of," he said, with a shudder ; "but why did you not appeal to your friends?"

"The St. Lances could never accept alms," she said, quietly. "Your gray English skies and leaden air helped to kill my husband. He could not bear the fogs, the cold, the rain ; he was pining for our bright, sunny France ; so when all danger was over, we came here to Provence in disguise. We had money left, and this old chateau was to let. The rent was very little, for it is a lonely, isolated place. We took it, and here my husband died—wore his noble heart away in exile, sorrow, poverty, and desolation. The St. Lances have served France well, yet the last of them died here, in exile and alone."

She paused for one minute, unable to say more ; but no tears dimmed those proud eyes—she had shed too many.

"My husband died just two years since ; my little Reine is now nearly five years old. The money that I had for my diamonds lasted until last year ; when it was all gone, I advertised for pupils."

"And you have plenty, I hope ?" he said.

"No ; I have but few. I make sufficient to meet my wants and expenses, but no more."

"I was in Paris last week," said Lord Clancey, "and

there I heard that you were living at the Chateau Rosiere, in Provence, where you took charge of a few pupils ; and hearing that, madame, has brought me here to you."

Then there was silence for some minutes, during which the mournful wail of the wind was plainly heard. Lord Clancey looked at the little child, then at the lady ; but her white hands were folded on her black dress, and her thoughts were far away.

"I must place a confidence in you, madame," said Lord Clancey, "that I have placed in no one else, and it relates to my little daughter here."

"Your daughter !" she said. "Ah, then you are married, Lord Clancey."

"It is of that I wanted to speak to you, madame. I must tell you my story, and then you will understand.

"I was always brought up," he continued, "in habits of luxury, and as my uncle's heir. No expense was spared over me ; I was allowed to do just as I liked ; some day or other I was to be Lord Clancey, and what I did mattered little. I was entirely dependent on my uncle, and he was very kind, very generous to me, with one exception—he would insist that I was to marry to please him, and not to please myself. I fell in love, madame ; but the girl I loved was poor and obscure. Her name was Alice Luttrell, and she was the daughter of a school-master living in a small town near Neversleigh. I told my uncle that I loved her, and his fury knew no bounds ; it was something terrible."

"I can imagine it," said madame, with a sad smile.

"He told me very plainly that if I married her, he would disinherit me. Brought up to consider myself his heir, knowing nothing of any profession, not having one shilling in the world independent of him, there was but one resource for me. A coward's resource, you will say, madame. It may be so; better to be a coward than break a woman's heart. I married Alice privately, and brought her over to France. She became my wife; my uncle thought she had met with a worse fate. I lived very happily with her for one year; then this little one was born, and, to avert my uncle's suspicions, I was obliged to return to England.

"Madame, I do not seek to excuse myself from blame; I have been wrong all through. I was wrong to marry in a secret, underhand manner; and I did wrong afterward by not perhaps neglecting, but from my long absences from my wife. She pined away, and I could not leave my uncle. Six months since my uncle died, and I was engaged incessantly for some weeks in arranging affairs.

"I had resolved then upon bringing my wife and child home, acknowledging my marriage, and making all amends to Alice. That was my intention; but when I reached the pretty little village where I had left my wife, I found her dying. No efforts could save her. She had pined and sorrowed until there was not the least hope of her recovery, and the third day after my arrival she

died. I was left with my little Nina. I need not tell you of my grief, of the bitterness of the blow that overwhelmed me. I buried my wife in the pretty cemetery of the village, and there my love-story ended. I thought it useless to avow my marriage. It could do no good ; it would only raise a storm and tempest of gossip and scandal, detestable to me. If Alice had lived, I would have braved it all ; but Alice was dead, and there was nothing to be gained, so that I determined to keep that which had been secret so long secret still. No one knows anything of it. I left my little Nina under the care of a very faithful and affectionate nurse. I heard last week that the nurse was ill. I hastened over ; the nurse is dead, and, madame, I bring my little daughter to you."

CHAPTER III.

THE CHARGE ACCEPTED.

Lord Clancey raised the little one in his arms.

"She is a pretty, loving, gentle child, quite French. She does not seem to remember one word of English, if ever she has spoken any. She is a graceful and refined child, with whom you may safely allow your own daughter to associate; and, madame, the great wish of my heart is to place her under your charge."

Madame de St. Lance bowed; there was no emotion either of pleasure or displeasure in her face.

"I accept the charge, Lord Clancey," she said.

"I am deeply grateful to you, madame. Now, will you allow me to enter into explanations and to discuss terms? The Neversleigh estates are entailed, they can only pass to a male heir, consequently little Nina here is not, and never would be, my heiress. The daughters of the House of Clancey are always provided for by money saved from the income; in that same way I intend to provide for my daughter Nina. She shall be amply dowered; but, madame, this is where I require help. I have never acknowledged my marriage, and it's too late now; besides which, I have frankly told you, madame, I am averse to it. I am proud and sensitive. I should not care to

hear all the remarks and sneers, the scandal and comment. I wish, indeed it is now my firm determination, to keep my marriage a profound secret; but that secret shall not be to the detriment of my child. Madame, will you adopt her? Will you bring her up as your own child? Will you let her bear your name? And will you promise that she shall never hear from you this, the true story of her parentage?"

Madame was silent for a few minutes, and then she said, quietly:

"I do not quite like it, Lord Clancey; it does not seem to me *quite* fair."

"I am sure, madame," he interrupted, eagerly, "that you will allow me to be the best judge of that. My marriage, as I have told you frankly, was a great mistake. My poor Alice was all unfit to be Lady Clancey. I did her no wrong. I married her, and suffered for my folly. I am a just man, madame; and it seems to me that if I give to her daughter a good education and a liberal portion, I shall be doing full justice."

Madame looked thoughtful.

"You are, perhaps, the best judge," she said, slowly. "Pray proceed, Lord Clancey."

"I shall secure the sum of five hundred pounds per annum to my daughter, three hundred to be paid to you for her board and education, two hundred for her expenses; and this arrangement I should wish to continue in force till she is eighteen; then I shall arrange for her dowry."

Madame murmured something ; Lord Clancey could not tell what. Three hundred pounds a year ! It was untold riches to her. It meant freedom from cares, from privations, from poverty ; it meant ease and freedom, all that Reine required, and all that she wanted herself ; it meant good food and generous wine. Why not take it ? If she refused, the offer would simply be made to some one else.

"I shall require from you, madame, a faithful promise that you will never, under any circumstances—except, of course, with my free permission—divulge one word of this story to my daughter. She is too young now to retain any recollection, even the faintest, of her mother or myself. The memory of the past will all die away from her ; she need never know but that she is indeed and in truth your own child. Your daughter is too young to remember, and they will grow up sisters. Do you agree, madame ?"

There was a few minutes' sore struggle between the pride of the aristocrat and the need of the woman. More than once she was tempted to say "No—that such a charge was unworthy of a St. Lance." But three hundred a year ! no trouble over the rent-day ; plenty of peace—pride must submit. After all, she remembered, a king had once turned schoolmaster. Lord Clancey watched her keenly as she held the silent debate in her mind.

"I accept the charge," she said, slowly ; "and I will be quite true to my trust. Your daughter shall be brought up as my child,"

"I thank you," he said ; "I could not ask better fortune

for her. And now, madame, let me speak quite freely to you. I shall have all needful documents drawn out at once, so that there may never be any delay over the money; and pray remember that I do not wish at any time to influence you in any of your plans; go where you like, and form any plans you like. There is only one condition I should like to make. For the sake of drawing up the needful documents and placing this money in my daughter's name, I shall be compelled to tell my story to my lawyers, Messrs. Carstone & Leach, of Lincoln's Inn. If you will be good enough, madame, to write once or twice in the year, saying how and where my daughter is, I shall be well satisfied. There need not be any allusion to me in your letters; only state formally the condition of your charge."

"I will undertake to do that," said madame. Then she looked curiously at him.

"And you, my lord," she said, "do you feel no sorrow at parting with the child?"

"Most certainly; but it is better for me—better for her. I may speak frankly to you, Madame de St. Lance. It is highly probable that I may shortly marry again. I have admitted to you that my first marriage was a foolish, boyish mistake. I have seen a lady, beautiful and noble, who has won from me all the strength of my manhood, who has won my heart, and the deepest love of my soul. I do not care that she should know the story of my boyish, foolish infatuation."

"I understand," said the clear, rich voice of madame.

"Next week I will have forwarded to you all needful documents. You can sign them, keep some, and return others."

Then Lord Clancey took out his pocket-book.

"I did not care to incumber myself with luggage," he said, "so that I have not brought any clothes for the child. Here is a note for fifty pounds, madame; will you provide for her what she requires? Here also is the first half-year's payment, making two hundred pounds altogether."

Madame's white fingers trembled over the money; it seemed so little to him, it meant so much to her.

"I will give you a receipt, Lord Clancey," she said.

But he smiled.

"There is no need to give yourself the trouble, madame—that will do for the lawyers. I thank you very much for your kindness and patience; I thank you still more for granting my request."

"May I offer you some refreshment?" asked Madame de St. Lance.

He thanked her, but declined.

"I must be in England in thirty-six hours, if possible," he said; "every moment is precious to me. I have kept my carriage waiting at the chateau gates."

Then Lord Clancey raised the child in his arms, and gave her to madame. The little one looked up into the proud, stately face with something of fear in her own.

The young father bent down and kissed her ; something dimmed his eyes, and a sob died away on his lips.

"You will be very kind to her, madame, my poor little Nina ?" he said, gently.

"She shall be to me as my own child," said the lady ; and the little one seemed to understand something of the words, for she nestled her little head in the lady's neck.

"Good-by," said the father, as he kissed the child. "Farewell, madame ; you have made me your debtor for life."

The next moment he was gone, and, but for the child on her knee and the money on the table, she might have thought it all a dream.

CHAPTER IV.

A TERRIBLE MISTAKE.

Time had been when Hubert Ruthven had found himself more sought after than any man in London. He was known to be the heir of Lord Arncourt, of Neversleigh, than whom England knew no wealthier or more potent peer.

Hubert Ruthven was a prize. There was not a fair face in London that had not brightened for him. Mothers concluded long, eloquent lectures by saying :

“If, my dear Ethelrida, I could live to see you Lady Arncourt, I should die contented.”

Brunette and blonde, hoiden and blue-stocking had all been placed before him in their best aspect, beautiful belles had smiled, sung, and danced for him ; but, though Mr. Ruthven had the most profound veneration for all the fair sex, not one had touched his heart.

Perhaps he had been too early dazzled by all the genius and charms, the beauty and grace, that had been brought to bear upon him. He evinced no particular interest in any one. And Lord Arncourt began to grow anxious about the future of his nephew.

“I have remained single,” he would say, “because I

am—I freely confess it—a selfish Sybarite. You must not do the same, Hubert. I decided long ago, in my own mind, that women were very charming for a short space of time, but that a house was decidedly *more* comfortable without them. I could not endure the thought of all the patience, the fuss, the nonsense required to keep a wife in good temper; but, *emphatically*, Hubert, mind, your ideas must be different to mine.”

“They are different, uncle,” replied Mr. Ruthven, with a smile.

“I knew,” continued Lord Arncourt, “that *you* would be my heir. There was no need for me to wear what I consider the very heavy chains of Hymen. Your case is different. You succeed me; but, remember, if you should die childless, everything goes to Eric Chilvers, and that would prevent me from resting quietly even in my grave.”

“I assure you, uncle,” said Hubert Ruthven, gravely, “that I have not the least objection to marriage; the only difficulty that I can see is, among so many beautiful and graceful women, which to choose.”

“What do you find in Blanche Carrington to which any reasonable man could object?” asked Lord Arncourt.

“Too much dazzle and glitter. A man’s life would be worn away in no time.”

“There is Evelyn Rainten; no one could say the same thing of her.”

“Too sweet,” was the brief reply; “she has the same

agreeable smile for every one, and agrees with everything said. I should die of inanition."

"Lady Ethel Langham," suggested Lord Arncourt.

"A woman of one idea, and that idea how many miles of waltzing she can get through in one night."

"Hubert," said his uncle, solemnly, looking anxiously at him, "are you seeking for an ideal woman? Because if you are, let me assure you, you will not find one. What makes woman so charming?—the fact that she is a mass of contradictions, a mixture of virtues and faults; *without* the faults, she would be simply unendurable."

"I never thought of an ideal woman," replied Hubert; "but I have an old-fashioned idea that I should like to be loved for my own sake; and as my life would have to be spent with the woman I married, I should most certainly like to make a wise and prudent choice."

Lord Arncourt sighed pityingly.

"You must bear one thing in mind, Hubert, if you were my own son I could not love you more dearly; but if you should marry so as to disappoint me—through any quixotic nonsense—I should consider it my solemn duty to disinherit you, and adopt Eric Chilvers, much as I dislike him, in your place."

"Have no fear, uncle; I will not disappoint you. You have been very kind to me."

"You must increase your importance by marriage. England boasts no prouder title than Lord Arncourt, of Neversleigh; but if you could add to the importance

of the name by a good marriage, it would be a most excellent thing. Lady Ethel Langham, the Duke of Langmuirstied's daughter—who could be better than she?"

We therefore see that it was with a perfect understanding of his fate in all its branches, that Hubert Ruthven made that terrible mistake in his life.

There could not have been any position more enviable than that of Hubert Ruthven. Lord Arncourt made him what was in reality a magnificent allowance; but with his strange, quaint love of freedom from all restraint, he would not have his heir to live with him.

"I prefer being quite alone," he would say, when Hubert suggested even a long visit. "Life would be nothing to me without freedom; the restraint of a visitor would not suit me."

Although he always insisted upon this one idea of living quite alone, Hubert had the option of living at any place where his uncle was not. If Lord Arncourt was in Scotland, Hubert resided at Neversleigh; when his uncle used to go there, Mr. Ruthven went to London.

Every possible source of pleasure was open to the young man; rich, free, young, handsome, with one of the finest possessions in England before him, and nothing to do in return for it all but to marry to please his uncle.

"Never mind money," Lord Arncourt would say, at times, "you have not to think of that; noble birth is what you want in a wife. To tell you a secret, Hubert," he continued, "I have never spent more than half my in-

come ; the remainder has been accumulating until it forms a colossal fortune by itself. It shall be all yours if you please me, so that you can dispense with money in a wife, but you *cannot* dispense with high birth and noble blood."

That truth was repeated and repeated until it became duly impressed on Hubert's mind ; yet, for all that, it did not prevent the catastrophe.

Lord Arncourt, who had probably gratified every whim that it was possible for the heart of man to conceive, suddenly took a fancy for making a collection of Roman cameos. He imagined himself to be a perfect judge of cameos, and he was determined that the "Arncourt cameos" should be known all over England.

To indulge this caprice it was needful that he should go to Rome. Mr. Ruthven was sent for.

"I shall probably be away one year, perhaps two, for I intend my collection to be unrivaled, and I want you to reside the whole time at Neversleigh. At the town, Neverstay, there are several things on hand. The new schools are finished, but they have to be opened ; and, by the way, Hubert, you must get a good master for them. Do not spare money ; they are my gift to the town, and I like things done liberally."

Lord Arncourt went on to mention several other things that required attention. And all unconscious of what was in store for him, Hubert listened attentively, promising to carry out his uncle's wishes to the very letter.

"Remember," said Lord Arncourt, "that you are my

representative, and do not be afraid of dispensing hospitalities. I shall be pleased to hear of all kinds of gayeties, balls, dinners, fetes—anything you like ; but remember the most pleasing news you can send me will be of your engagement and coming marriage.”

“I really hope that I may be so fortunate,” said Hubert.

“I am told that the Duke of Ormescombe is about to purchase Herensley Park ; it is said that his daughter, Lady Grace Morelton, who was presented this year, is one of the most lovely girls in England. The great wish of my heart is that you may marry her.”

As Hubert watched the generous, open-handed, yet selfish man, depart, he did wish that fate might be kind to him, and that he might love and marry so to please his strange, liberal, cynical uncle.

When Lord Arncourt was gone, he took up his abode at Neversleigh Abbey, and busied himself in carrying out all his uncle's instructions.

The first thing of course was the schools ; but if he had known the trouble, the sorrow, the remorse that was to come to him over those schools, he would have fled far from Neversleigh.

He advertised for a capable master—not a young man ; he was too young himself to have much care for youth. In reply he was inundated with letters.

From the midst of countless numbers he chose one signed John Luttrell—a well-written, well-expressed, concise, business letter. The writer avowed himself capable

of conducting a school ; he had received a first-class education, and only desired one thing—a quiet resting-place where he could work and live in peace.

The letter pleased Mr. Ruthven. So little did he think it was an instrument of fate, he answered it, and the result was the engagement of John Luttrell as master for the Neverstay schools, at a salary of two hundred per annum, house and garden included.

Mr. Luttrell was to commence his duties toward the close of June, the school was to be opened by the rector, and a grand tea-party given to the pupils by way of inauguration.

If any one had warned Hubert Ruthven of the result, he would have fled in utter dismay.

CHAPTER V.

MEETING HIS FATE.

The twenty-seventh of June arrived, and when Hubert Ruthven awoke he remembered that it was the day of the school fete, and that duty required him to be present at Neverstay.

He knew that Mr. Luttrell had arrived, and had expressed himself delighted with the pretty gabled school-house and the large, picturesque garden.

All orders had been given for the children's feast. It was to take place in a large orchard belonging to one of the Neversleigh farms; still Hubert felt it his duty to ride over to the schoolmaster's house and see for himself that all was well.

He rose early. The typical "gentleman who lives at home at ease" is not always to be found in a wealthy man; he works harder at times, and more industriously, than those whom he employs.

Hubert rose at six, took breakfast at seven, and rode off, while the dew was yet on the grass, to Neverstay.

In the after years how well he remembered every detail of that ride. The blue sky, with its white, pearly clouds fast vanishing before the heat of the summer sun; the air

so full of fragrance from the hay and the clover, from the lime trees in flower, from the lilacs fast vanishing, from the huge white magnolias, from the wild roses that filled the hedges with such vivid masses of scarlet bloom ; the woods were filled with bluebells and wild larkspur ; the birds were beside themselves with glee on this bright June morning. He saw bees so busy that they filled the air with their musical murmur ; butterflies with bright purple and golden wings. He was no poet, but his heart grew warm and tender as he looked around him, for it is such a fair, bright world, if we have any heart at all, it must be touched by its brightness.

So he rode on through the sunshine and the flowers until he came to the schools. They were built just outside the town, so that the children might have all the benefit of the fresh, sweet air. They were pretty and picturesque, with large windows, and bright, large, cheerful rooms. He did not wait to enter, but rode on to the house, that stood at some little distance from the schools. A beautiful cottage—not new, as was evident from the abundance of foliage that wreathed its walls, red and white roses framing the windows, passion flowers twining round the rustic porch, jessamine and fragrant woodbines mixed with drooping vine leaves. It stood in the midst of a magnificent garden that stretched at the back of the house far down to the brook-side ; there the pretty brook ran between green banks away into the clover meadows, and lost itself in the broad, clear river Never.

It was a picture of neatness and beauty; the windows were all open, and the lace curtains looked white as snow-drops.

“Verily, an ideal cottage!” said Hubert to himself.

The door was opened. He went into a small, pretty passage covered with bright, cool matting, and was met by a little maid-servant. He inquired if Mr. Luttrell was at home. She said he had gone down to the orchard, but would the gentleman wait?

So Mr. Ruthven was shown into a pretty parlor, filled with flowers and books.

“I could almost fancy a lady had arranged this place,” he said, looking round on the graceful flower-stands, pretty bird-cages, and little ornaments.

One side of the room was lined with a low book-shelf. As he read the names of the volumes, Hubert smiled.

“My schoolmaster will do,” he said.

Still the sunny moments flew, and Mr. Luttrell did not appear. The window was open, and the garden looked very tempting. He thought he would walk through it and see what the flowers were like.

He passed the beds of lilies and roses, the great cluster of clove carnations, the old-fashioned southernwood, with its subtle fragrance, the mignonette and sweet pansies; then suddenly he heard a voice singing:

“Dinna forget, laddie; dinna forget.”

A sweet, clear voice, with a ring of passion and tender-

ness ; and the sad, sweet words of the old Scotch song came to him over the flowers.

"Dinna forget, laddie ; dinna forget." He was almost afraid to break the spell by moving, but when the song ceased he went forward. There was a large space of green grass where the apple trees grew, and sitting under one of them—the blossoms making a frame for her, falling around in rich showers—was a young girl, delicate and lovely as Titania herself ; a girl with a sweet, pure face ; a white brow, from which waved clustering hair of a golden hue ; dark gray eyes, fringed with long lashes ; sweet red lips, and features whose delicate loveliness was something wonderful. He caught a glimpse of the pretty foot—one that might have belonged to a duchess ; little white, slender hands. The girlish figure was simply clad in a robe of blue muslin, with white lace at the throat.

A picture as fair, as pure, and as bright as the morning itself ; full of gleams of sunlight ; one that from his memory was never to die.

He went to her, and she started, not in alarm, but with surprise. He took off his hat, and stood bare-headed before her.

"I can only trust that I am not intruding," he said.
"I called to see Mr. Luttrell."

A light broke over her face, making it so radiantly beautiful that he drew back, half in fear.

"My father," she said ; "and he is gone down to the orchard, thinking that he might see Mr. Ruthven there."

"I am Mr. Ruthven," he replied ; and she drew back with something like awe in those dark gray eyes.

"You are Mr. Ruthven?" she said ; and he could not help noticing that there was something of reverence in her voice.

"My father will be so sorry to have missed you," she said, simply ; "he was so anxious to see you."

"I can wait until he returns," said Mr. Ruthven. "I am not busy, and, if you will permit me, I will wait here with you, Miss Luttrell."

She smiled assent, and her face flushed.

"You have chosen a pretty spot out here among the apple-blossoms," he said, as he sat down on the rugged roots of a tree.

"Yes ; more beautiful than anything I have ever dreamed of in my life. It is strange that you should come just now, Mr. Ruthven, for I was just thinking of you."

"Thinking of me?" he said, in surprise. "I am very much honored. May I ask what you were thinking about me?"

"I was wondering," she said, looking at him with grave, sweet, unconscious eyes, "whether you were young or old, or what you were like ; and thinking that I should like to see you just once, and thank you for all the great happiness you have given me."

He looked still more surprised.

"I am afraid you credit me with too much," he said.

"What happiness can I have given you?"

She smiled, and that smile made her so wondrously beautiful, that he was again almost frightened before her.

"It is through your goodness," she said, "that we came here, and I have never known what real happiness means till now. All my life I have lived in a narrow street in Islington; I never even saw a real garden like this. I did not know the world held such beautiful places as Neverstay."

"Have you seen Neversleigh and the woods?" he asked.

"Not yet," she replied. "My father said I must content myself with the house and garden at first, lest I should really lose my senses with delight. I have only seen a real wood in my dreams."

"But did you never go out of Islington?" he asked.

"Sometimes; very rarely. I have been to Hampton Court, to Hampstead, and Highgate; but they do not seem real country like this. There is not one moment of the beautiful day in which I do not thank you."

"I am much pleased," he said, "that my choice was so fortunate; but I think it is all due to your father's merit, and not to my goodness."

"I was thinking that I should like to tell you how exceedingly happy your kindness has made me," she said, musingly; "and now I have thanked you. But words are very weak to express what I feel."

"You express yourself most charmingly," he said, almost at a loss for words.

She laughed, and that graceful, silvery laughter was like the chime of sweet bells.

"My father speaks very differently," she said ; "he tells me that I do not speak good grammar even."

He was rather startled at that.

"With such a clever father, you must, I am sure, be clever yourself," he said.

"No, I am not ; I always prayed him not to educate me. He wanted me to learn Latin and Greek. He used to talk to me about Lady Jane Grey and her learning, but the very thought was terrible to me. No one educates the birds, yet how sweetly they sing. What is more beautiful than an untrained flower ?"

Hubert Ruthven looked in positive wonder at the fair, pure face.

"I begged him," she continued, "to let me lead a simple, careless, happy, graceful life ; and, though he was unwilling at first, he consented after a time, and the result is I am not clever."

There was a sound of footsteps. She looked round. The color deepened in her face, the light in her eyes.

"Here is my father," she said ; and by the proud tone of voice he knew that in her eyes the world did not hold that father's equal.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SCHOOL FETE.

Mr. Ruthven was pleased, as he had expected to be, with the schoolmaster. He was not a gentleman; he lacked that nameless, intangible something that proclaims the gentleman—the man of good birth, of good descent, accustomed to the refinements of good society—he lacked that; but he was thoughtful, competent, intelligent—a well-educated man.

His manner to Mr. Ruthven was excellent; there was no cringing, no fawning, nothing subservient; yet he was respectful, and seemed in everything to admit the other's superiority.

They all then returned to the house, Alice holding her father's hand, and a very pleasant hour was spent. The master confirmed what his daughter had said. How delightful the change was from Islington to Neverstay!

"It is like coming to a fresh world," he said. "I think we shall be very happy here."

Then he turned to his daughter with an air of fondness and pride that did not escape Mr. Ruthven.

"I did not mention in my letter," he said, "that I had

a daughter, presuming that the fact was of no importance to any one but myself."

"Miss Luttrell is a very charming fact," was the gallant reply. "I hope she will find Neverstay agreeable. You will make friends and acquaintances in time. Some day, when you are disengaged, I shall be pleased to show you all over the abbey and the grounds; we have some very splendid pictures and some very beautiful books."

Mr. Luttrell expressed thanks. Alice spoke no word, but the delight that shone in her face surpassed any that she could put into words. Then it was time for Hubert to go; he could find no pretext for lingering. He arranged to be at the orchard at four, and remain for an hour.

"You will find the school fete a grand institution," he said. "All the fine ladies will be there."

"Who are the fine ladies?" asked Mr. Luttrell, with a smile.

"Lady Ethel Langham, Lady Delamaine, the Misses Douglass—I could not even remember the names."

"Then I must not go," said Alice, drawing back, with a little look of disappointment on her face.

"Why not? Certainly, you must—that is, if you will," said Mr. Ruthven, with a smile. "You are not afraid of fine ladies, are you?"

"I have never seen any," she replied; "but I think I should be very much frightened at them."

Mr. Ruthven laughed, and Mr. Luttrell placed his hand on the golden head. The same thought passed through

the mind of both—that she had nothing to fear from being brought into competition with anybody.

And then Hubert Ruthven left. Mr. Luttrell went with him to the garden gate, and stood while he mounted. He rode back by the same way, through the same woods, in the same sunlight; but what had come over them? What had happened to him? It seemed an age since he had risen that morning, cool, calm and self-possessed. He had ridden through those woods without a thought save for the business he was bent upon; he was returning haunted by a lovely young face, haunted by the sweet gray eyes and lovely lips, haunted by the refrain of a sweet, sad song, “Dinna forget, laddie, dinna forget,” his heart beating as it had never done before, his pulse thrilling, his whole soul warmed by the memory of that fair young face.

What had come over him? He did not know. He was only just twenty, but he had run the gantlet of the London ball-rooms; he had seen beautiful faces, with trained glances and artificial smiles; but he had seen nothing like this girlish, simple beauty, so free from art, so unconscious, so devoid of guile.

What had come over him? There was another color on the grass, a brighter light in the sky; the music of the birds seemed sweeter and fuller; life seemed gayer and brighter. Snatches of song rose to his lips. The summer itself was not brighter or warmer than the love that, unknown to him, was springing in his heart.

That morning, as he sat at breakfast, the notion of a

school fete had been rather tiresome than not; now he took out his watch to count the hours and see how long it would be before he saw her again.

"Ah! if fine ladies knew the charm of simplicity," he said to himself, "we should have no more of affectation."

How he enjoyed his lunch, praised the efforts of the cook, praised the wine, until the servants, accustomed to his good humor, wondered at its sunny brightness.

He was quite unconscious, though he took great pains with his dressing, though he placed a wonderful white rose in his coat, it never once occurred to him that it was all for her; yet he was thinking of her. He told the head gardener to prepare a bouquet of choice flowers.

"She seemed so fond of flowers," he said to himself; "and many of these will be quite strange to her."

But he knew no more than a dreaming child what had come over him, or the meaning of this strange light that lay on earth and sky.

The fete was a most delightful one; the orchard was the very place above all others for it; the grass was long and thick, softer than the finest carpet ever woven by mortal hands; the shade beneath the great apple and pear trees was pleasant and fragrant; there was a band of music, and to the children's great delight, huge swings were fastened among the great trees. There were large tables spread with tempting cakes and luscious fruits—a table round which the children gathered in keen delight. Such preparations for tea gladdened the little ones even

more than the fruit. But perhaps the most amusing part of all was the fine ladies, who, with all the gracious patronage imaginable, thought themselves "most condescending." There was Lady Ethel Langham talking very pretty poetry about children and flowers, yet most carefully avoiding both, and there were the Misses Douglass indulging in pastoral raptures.

The entrance of Mr. Ruthven produced a great sensation among them. He paid his devoirs with a smile on his handsome face, and then looked anxiously around for Alice Luttrell.

He saw her standing at her father's side, looking half shyly at the fine ladies who had been criticising her, wondering if she thought herself good-looking, etc. He went over to her at once.

"I hope you are enjoying yourself, Miss Luttrell," he said; "it is a pretty, bright, animated scene."

"I am half frightened," she said, gently.

"What! at the fine ladies?—they are very harmless," said Hubert.

"But they look so beautiful and so stately."

"Did you ever look in a glass?" asked Mr. Ruthven, laughingly.

"Yes," she replied, wonderingly.

"Then you need not fear on the score of beauty. Do you see that stately-looking lady in black?"

"Yes," said the girl.

"That is Lady Delamaine. I will introduce your

father and you to her, and you will see how little there is to fear."

The schoolmaster knew perfectly well, no one better, the exact behavior required. The great lady's heart was won by the beautiful, blushing face, the timid manner, the shy, sweet embarrassment.

She dismissed Mr. Luttrell with a few words, but kept his daughter by her side, and took great delight in her. Mr. Ruthven stood for some time behind Lady Delamaine's chair.

"It seems to me" said Lady Ethel Langham, "that if we want a word from Mr. Ruthven, we must pay attention to that odious girl."

They did so, and the "odious girl" proved to be so beautiful, so modest, so graceful, and so shy, they agreed that "for a young person of *her class*, she was really superior."

CHAPTER VII.

"TOO GOOD TO BE LOST."

Any one can see the end of that summer Idyl—Hubert Ruthven, just twenty, tired of fashionable society and what he called fine ladies, longing with a young man's longing for love and happiness, the romance of heart and soul just awakened into life—notning could have been more propitious for a love-story.

She herself was so deliciously naive and simple, she had not one idea of coquetry; but the most dangerous flirt who ever played with the hearts of men was not so dangerous as this simple girl. She showed such keen delight in his society, she worshiped him with such unconscious devotion; she was so frank, so charming, that he could not help loving her.

He had not thought of anything of the kind when their acquaintance first began; he was the generous patron, she the daughter of the patronized; he was the grand signeur, she the schoolmaster's daughter; he the greatest man in the county, she one of the humblest girls. What could there be in common between them except the relationship of patron and patronized? He liked to send baskets of fruit and game down to the school-house; it seemed a

generous and a proper thing to do. He liked to place bouquets with the fruit ; for one fond of flowers it seemed only a charity. He gave the schoolmaster the run of the library, and one fine morning he kept his word and took them both over the abbey and the grounds, showed them the state rooms and the pictures, all the glories of Never-stay, and Alice thought herself in Fairy-land. She could not believe this was the real natural earth ; her most fantastic dreams had not even foreshadowed anything so grand, so gorgeous.

And he—the prince, the hero who had dawned upon her young life so suddenly—was to be master of all this. She did not think so much of the mere material advantage it would give him as she did of the halo that surrounded him.

Father and daughter had spent the whole of a happy day there ; they had partaken of lunch, set out in the dining-room. For the first time in her life Alice saw plate of silver and gold—saw such fruit and flowers as she had thought were only to be found in sunny, southern climes—had tasted wines that might have been the true nectar of the gods. It was like a new revelation to her—a new world. No wonder that it steeped her senses in dreamy languor, and woke her heart and soul into love that was almost pitiful from its intensity. Hubert Ruthven did not seem to the girl like a mere ordinary man ; he was a hero, a prince, with all Fairy-land at his command—a king, who had but to utter a wish, and it was gratified—a wonder, a

marvel ! And the girl's simple soul fell down before him, while the worship she gave him was in itself a greater marvel than all.

Hubert Ruthven was essentially a gentleman ; he had, perhaps, taken his share in the follies of the world, but no one could lay a dishonorable action to his door. As for the betrayal of a woman, he would sooner have thought of picking a friend's pocket—it was not in him to do such a deed ; so that no thought of harm to Alice ever crossed his mind. He had been so skeptical over love, he had seen so much of what was false and unworthy to pass by that name, that he did not know what was happiness ; he did not know that he was falling in love with Alice ; he did not know that the glamour falling over him, the light that made the world so fair, the tender, strange happiness that filled heart and soul, was love ; he would have been the first to laugh incredulously at such an idea.

It did not occur to him that he was continually finding some pretext or other for visiting Neverstay ; that a day seldom passed without his seeing Alice. It did not once occur to him as strange that going through the woods he should meet her so often, and that they should sit together by the brook-side, whiling the long, bright summer day away. He had his faults, but he was a gentleman, and a man of honor. If he had believed that he was falling in love with Alice, or that Alice was doing the same with him, he would have gone away at once.

He brought her books from the library ; he made her

many simple, pretty presents of engravings and rare photographs ; his words and thoughts opened fresh worlds to her, and, poor girl, she did what was only natural under the circumstances—gave him her heart, her whole love, and made her world, her life, all begin and end with him.

How long matters might have gone on in this uncertain way can never be told, but that Lady Delamaine happened to interfere. She was a kind-hearted, good-natured woman, and she had taken a kindly liking to the schoolmaster's lovely daughter. She heard the rumors of Hubert's continual presence at the schoolmaster's cottage, and from simple good-nature resolved to give him a hint. It was not long before she had an opportunity. In the middle of September a large shooting-party assembled at her house, and he was one of the guests. Under pretext of speaking to him on some business connected with the schools, she took him into her own room.

"Mr. Ruthven," she said, in her frank and cordial manner, "I want to say a few words to you in good part; you promise me not to be offended?"

"I could never be offended with you, Lady Delamaine," he replied.

"In that case I shall be just as frank with you as though you were my own son."

"You could not do me greater honor, or give me greater pleasure," said Hubert, touched by the elder lady's tones.

"The schoolmaster at Neverstay, Mr. Luttrell, has a

very pretty daughter," continued Lady Delamaine; "so pretty, poor girl, that she will find her beauty a snare, I am afraid."

Hubert's face flushed, but his eyes did not fall before the calm, serene gaze.

"I am told that few days elapse without your horse being seen at her door, and that you spend whole hours with her."

"It is perfectly true," he replied, struck himself by remembering how true it was.

"Well, my dear Mr. Ruthven, we have agreed that I am to speak honestly. Why do you go there?"

He paused again, remembering that he had never even asked himself the question.

"*Why?*" he repeated. "I declare, Lady Delamaine, I do not know; because I have found it pleasant, I suppose."

"Exactly so; and I am quite sure you are too good to sacrifice the fair name of a young girl because you find your visits pleasant."

"I have not done so," he replied, proudly.

"Pardon me—not intentionally, perhaps; but it is done. People are beginning to talk strangely about Miss Luttrell, and to look coldly on her, because you are known to spend so much time with her."

"People might learn to mind their own business," he replied, with a warmer flush on his face.

"That they will never do," said Lady Delamaine. "The

best thing is to give them no opportunity for talking. When a young man visits a girl and pays her attention, it means one of two things."

"What are they?" he asked.

"It means that he loves her, and intends to make her his wife; or it means that he is a villain, and intends to *ruin* her."

Hubert Ruthven stands silent before the honest words of an honest woman.

"You mean neither of these things," she continued.

"You could not, in your position, marry such a girl—it would be an incongruous marriage. And I am equally sure that you are incapable of the other."

"You do me justice," he said, with a flush that mounted to his brow.

"It is only natural to suppose," continued her ladyship, "that the young girl must in the end become attached to you, if you persevere in these visits. Will it not be better to avoid all further chance of wrong or mistake by discontinuing them altogether?"

He was silent for a few minutes; then he held out his hand to her with a frank, sweet smile.

"I am quite at a loss how to thank you," he said.

"Lady Delamaine, I wish every young man had a sensible friend like you. I have acted thoughtlessly—that I confess with shame and sorrow; but I have done no worse. I will take your advice, and pretty Alice shall not come to sorrow through me."

"Spoken like yourself," said Lady Delamaine ; "she is a pretty girl, and a good girl—too good to be lost."

"Do not mention such a thing," he said, with a shudder ; "the girl is pure and simple as a child ; it would be cruel even to think of her being lost. Thank you, Lady Delamaine ; you shall see that you have not spoken to me in vain."

But during the remainder of the day he was abstracted and ill at ease. Of course it must be done. Scandal must not touch Alice through him. Yet rather than have told her that they must give up all their pleasant interviews and pleasant hours, he would have faced the most deadly peril.

CHAPTER VIII.

"WHAT CAN IT BE?"

Hubert Ruthven was never slow to act when right demanded the action. He heard enough that day to convince him that his visits to Neverstay had caused no little excitement and gossip. The friends with whom he went out shooting made many illusions that he perfectly understood; he was teased, half laughed at, half envied; but through it all he preserved the most grave and unconscious demeanor. He would not for her sake allow them to think they were understood.

He must go once more and tell her he had unconsciously done her this great wrong, and tell her that he would not go often to Neverstay for the future; that she must forgive him. It was a disagreeable thing to do, still he must do it; and it would teach him a lesson for the future; but all that day there was a terrible weight hanging over him; all the glamour and brightness that had made the world so fair was gone, the brightness from the sunshine, the sweetness from the flowers. He was only conscious of a terrible unrest, and a vague burden of sorrow.

He went that morning to Neverstay, and, as was his

custom, took lunch at the Arncourt Arms ; there he met several gentlemen whom he knew ; they had lunch and a game of billiards, and he heard more than enough to convince him that he ought to lose no time in carrying out his promise.

He was congratulated everywhere on his conquest and on his skill in keeping his secret. When he looked unconscious, they laughed ; when he grew angry, they teased him in most unmerciful terms, until Mr. Ruthven lost patience ; then they gravely assured him that that was the worst symptom he had shown yet.

Poor Alice ! So unconscious with her birds and flowers, so engrossed with her new and beautiful life, how little she understood that already men had sat in judgment upon her, and pronounced her sentence.

He said to himself that what had to be done should be done at once ; but of all the unfortunate times for doing it, he chose the evening of a beautiful September day.

He would not ride over to Neverstay ; then no more could be said about his horse being seen hour after hour at the door. Fate so ordered it, that he walked through the woods when the sunbeams were dying in the western sky ; when the air was filled with the rich aromatic odor of falling leaves and autumn flowers ; when the hedges were scarlet with berries, and the ground a carpet of gold and red, when the birds were singing their vesper hymn, and a holy calm had fallen over the earth.

It was equally unfortunate that by the brook-side he saw

pretty Alice sitting, watching the clear water with a most melancholy gaze. She sprang up at the sight of him.

"Oh, Mr. Ruthven," she cried, "I am so glad to see you ; I thought you had gone away."

He was full of good resolutions ; still he was only a man—a young man, too—and the light in that face touched the core of his heart.

"Why did you think I had gone away?" he asked.

"It is three whole days since I have seen you," she cried, a blush spreading over her lovely face—"three whole days. Ah ! I hope three such days will never come again. It has seemed to me as though a funeral pall were spread over earth and heaven.

What was he to say ? She was unconscious as a child. She knew no more of the full meaning of her own words than a bird does of its song.

"Let us sit down, Alice, and have a long talk," he said.

They sat down side by side in a picturesque nook, framed by the scarlet hedge, the pretty brook running at their feet. He hardly dared to look at the girl's face, it was so bright and happy, while he felt he was going to dash the brightness away.

"I thought you had gone away without bidding us good-by," said Alice, "and yet I felt sure that you were too good and too kind for that."

"Certainly," he said, trying to speak carelessly ; "why should I run away in that fashion, without one word, when we have been such good friends?"

She looked at him a little wistfully.

"I have been busy," he said, for those calm gray eyes seemed almost to demand an answer. Then her face cleared, and a smile, beautiful as that seen on the face of a child, came to her lips.

"I thought there must be some reason that was not a cruel one. I hope, ah ! how much I hope, that you will not be so busy again. It was so strange not to see you, it was like being in another world. If I did not know differently, I should think that you made the sunshine bright, and the flowers sweet—for everything has seemed brighter and sweeter since I knew you."

"Has it, Alice ? I am very glad."

Still this was not making much progress with the matter that brought him there. If she would only look away. But the lovely gray eyes and the sweet flower-like face were turned to him.

"It is strange," she continued, musingly, "if I am reading a beautiful book, it does not seem to me that the sense is complete unless you read it too. I find myself always wondering what you think and what you will say."

Now, if those sweet, rosy lips, with their child-like prattle, would but turn away ! How was he to tell her ?

"I never knew," continued the girl, "that life could be so bright and beautiful as I find it. I have read grand things of heaven. I am afraid I must be very wicked, for I do not think heaven can be any better."

"Only," he said, "there is no sorrow and no parting there."

He was not looking at her, yet he saw the sweet lips turn deathly white and spring apart.

"*Parting*," she replied, with a shudder of dread. "Oh! that is a terrible word. I cannot endure it."

The little brook sang on. "Could you not fancy," she said, "that the brook was singing a real tune. I could almost put words to it."

"You are fanciful," he said.

"It is you who have taught me to be so," she replied, with a smile. "I think you have taught me every pleasant and beautiful thing that I have known in my life."

He saw an opening here, and it was getting time that he said something of his errand.

"We have spent a great deal of time together," he said, slowly. "I was thinking to-day how much, and it quite astonished me."

The smile deepened in her eyes and on her lips.

"Yes," she said; "but I am not astonished. I have counted every hour, and can tell you all that has happened in them."

"Alice," he said, hurriedly. "I have something not very pleasant to say to you. I blame myself—only myself; but I am afraid that I have unconsciously done you a great wrong."

She bent forward, looking eagerly in his face.

"*You have wronged me!*" she cried; "that is quite impossible. How could such a thing be?"

He looked as he felt, terribly embarrassed. How could he tell her that evil men said evil things of her? The white wild lilies that grew in the woods were not more pure and spotless. There seemed to be a halo of purity around her that it was pitiful to break through. He devoutly wished every one concerned in this unpleasant business at sea.

"I hardly know how to explain to you," he said; "but idle people have been commenting on my coming so often to the school-house."

"Is it the fine ladies?" she asked, with a faint smile.

"Not exactly," he replied, the memory of Lady Delamaine rising before him, and seeming to demand justice.

She looked at him more eagerly.

"Who is it, then, Mr. Ruthven?—what do they say?"

"It seems to me that every one has interfered more or less with us," he replied; "ladies, gentlemen, and every one else."

"But will you tell me what they say?" she cried, in an agony of suspense.

"What they say is, I am almost afraid, true," he said; "at least, it has made me very unhappy, for your sake even more than my own."

"For my sake!" she repeated, with fast paling lips.

"Oh! Mr. Ruthven, what can it be?"

There was nothing for it but to tell her the exact truth.

"People say, Alice, that I have been doing wrong in

coming to see you so often. My child, do not turn so white—do not tremble ; I thought no evil. Your society was very pleasant to me ; your beauty, your purity and grace had a charm for me, and perhaps I have been selfish. I liked being with you, and I forgot all that might possibly happen in the way of scandal and gossip.”

He spoke humbly, not waiting for her answer. She did not speak, and he went on :

“I am very sorry—more sorry than I can tell you—but I must mend the wrong I have done. The gossip will soon die away when it is found that the cause for it no longer exists. I must give up our pleasant interviews, Alice, though we shall always, I hope, be the best of friends.”

There was no answer, but a sudden stir, and Hubert saw that the poor girl had fallen in a dead swoon at his feet.

CHAPTER IX.

VANQUISHED BY TEARS.

Terrified and alarmed, he raised the drooping figure in his arms. The sweet face was so white, so deathly cold, that at first a terrible fear came over him that she was dead.

He held her in his arms, he called her name, but there was no sign of life. He clasped her to his heart, as he might have done a little child ; then he kissed the white lips.

"Alice! Alice, my darling!" he cried. "How she must have loved me to care so much! Alice! do you hear me? Look up, my darling; I did not mean to be so cruel."

Dear Heaven, how beautiful she was! The white eyelids, with their drooping lashes—the lovely, innocent face. And how she must have loved him—how dearly she must love him, when the very thought of his leaving her would drive her into the arms of death!

If he could but kiss some color and warmth into the white face—if he could but win one word from those sweet lips!

"Alice!" he cried again; "look up, my darling. I am frightened!"

Then the loved voice seemed to pierce the dulled brain; she opened her eyes, and when she found herself clasped in his arms, a hot flush rose even to the white brow.

"Alice," he said, gently, "how you frightened me!"

"Did I?" she whispered. "I remember—you said you must leave me. Lay me down and let me die. I am not angry; if you were thoughtless, so was I; and it was so pleasant. Let me die; I do not care to live one hour longer. I know you must go from me; but be kind to me first, and let me die!"

"Nay, Alice!" he cried, charmed by her simplicity, her love, her tenderness. "I will *not* leave you; you shall have love and life, not death."

But she had escaped from the clasp of his arms, and had thrown herself on the ground, with her face buried in the long, deep grass. She sobbed as though her heart would break, until the pitiful sound touched him so deeply he could bear it no longer.

He knelt down by her side. He was not the first man vanquished by a woman's tears.

"Alice," he said, "I cannot bear it; the world may do and say what it will, but I cannot bear it."

Never while he lived did he forget the agonized face she raised to his, so full of white despair that no words could describe.

"I understand," she said, hoarsely. "You *must* leave

me. I have been so blind and so mad. I forgot. It was heaven to be with you, and I forgot. You are a rich seigneur, the lord of all around, and I am a poor, obscure girl. I forgot that in my madness, when I dared to think of you."

"Alice, Alice!" he said, "listen to me."

"No," she continued, turning her white face from him ; "I must not listen. You must go, and I must die. I would not live without you if I could. I would not go back to that old life in which you had no share. I *could* not. Heaven help me ! I could not. If you would only go away now, Mr. Ruthven, and leave me here lying alone, I should be dead by morning light."

"But, Alice," he said again, "you must not die."

"What else is there left for me," she said, bitterly. "I am not reproaching you. I had rather my lips were burned than they should ever utter one word of reproach against you. Why should they ? What can they say ? You were kind to me, and I—I—the sunlight of your presence dazzled me ; I was weak and foolish enough to think about you. It is all my fault. I am ready to suffer the penalty ; but as for asking me to go back to my old life, to the quiet home, my father's love, my every-day duties—I could not do it."

A passionate shudder seized her ; a passionate murmur of unspoken anger passed over her lips.

"But, Alice—Alice—what shall you do ?" he said.

"I shall seek for death and find it !" she cried, with a

bitter laugh. "The only gift I will not take from your hand is life."

He then threw his arm round her, as though fearing that she would escape him. Never had she looked so beautiful; the pearly tears hanging on the long, dark lashes, the eyes full of light and fire, the ruby lips tremulous, the whole face full of sensitive sorrow. So beautiful, that as he looked at her a sense of wonder seized him.

Then he pictured her lying with that beautiful face, white and cold, raised to the night skies—dead.

"Alice!" he cried, "my darling, I will not leave you. The world may say and do what it likes; I will never leave you."

She looked at him with sudden, startled joy in her face, such wistful, passionate, pleading love in her eyes.

"You will never leave me!" she said. "Oh, Mr. Ruthven, do you mean that you will *never* leave me?"

"That I will not," he said, "let the world do and say what it will. Alice—Alice—I love you, my darling; nothing in life shall divide us."

"*You love me?*" said the girl.

"Indeed I do," he replied, bending his handsome face over her. "I was trying to be prudent and worldly-wise; let prudence and worldly wisdom go to the winds. I will have none of them. I love you, and you shall be my darling wife, Alice."

"Your wife," she said, quietly; and then she sat for a

few minutes, lost in such a trance of happiness that words could not express.

"Your wife, Mr. Ruthven," she said again. "Oh, how good, how noble you are! If I live for you, and die for you, shall I ever be able to thank you for your love? Why, a queen might be proud of it, and I am only poor and humble."

"You are everything to me," he said. He had no thought of his uncle's warning. He only remembered that the loveliest, the sweetest, the most loving of girls had given him her heart.

They saw no longer the woods of Neverstay; the little brook sang to deaf ears; the dying sunbeams fell on them like a blessing; all the pain and the sorrow were forgotten; all the sense of disparity and the world's sneers, all Lord Arncourt's counsels—they only remembered that they loved each other, and that nothing in this world should divide them.

They were not roused from their happy trance until the gloaming faded, and the wind blew cold from the pine trees; then Hubert said:

"My darling Alice, I could linger here forever; but you must go home."

It was with a new sense of protection that he offered her his arm.

"You must take double care of yourself now," he said, "for you belong to me."

When they reached home, he said to her, suddenly:

"Alice, shall you mind keeping our secret until I have heard from my uncle?"

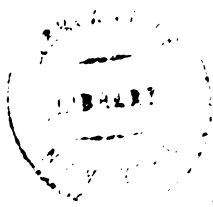
She clung a little closer to his arm.

"Will your uncle be angry?—will he try to take you away from me?" she asked.

"My uncle is such a strange old bachelor, I can never tell what he is likely to do," said Hubert, with a confused laugh; "but you will grant my request, Alice—keep what has passed a profound secret between us until I tell you what my uncle says."

She promised, and in the silver light of a southern moon he kissed her again, calling her his own promised wife.

Yet, despite the glamour of love's young dream, as he walked home to Neverstay he shivered with doubt as with cold, and was almost afraid to own to himself that he had done a very foolish thing—one that he might regret to the last hour of life.



CHAPTER X.

"TIME PROVES ALL THINGS."

Had he done a wise or foolish deed? Such a question should not occur to a triumphant lover, but it did to him. His heart was beating with triumph; his pulse thrilled at the memory of her tender words and looks; his soul seemed moved to its very depths; his face was flushed. As he rode through the woodlands, he called her name aloud—"Alice Ruthven;" yet, despite his rapture, despite the triumphant the warm beating of his heart, the happy love, something whispered to him that he had not done a wise deed.

Some words—not the love-song of a poet, nor the fervid prose of a novelist, but the sensible words of a philosopher—came to him. He could not remember them as they were written, but they seemed to be floating in his mind. Something of a young man's foolish fancy, mistaken for love—something of the heart's undisciplined desires, and the fever called first love. He drew the reins as he rode under the limes. Some one else had written that love made or marred a life; was his to be made by this wild fever that flushed his cheeks and made his hands tremble?—should he be a nobler, wiser man for this hot passion

which had so powerfully swayed him?—would life be more full of noble aims, heaven any nearer?

"Time will show," he answered himself; "time proves all things."

He flung those thoughts to the winds. How beautiful she was, this girl who loved him so! How bright the blue eyes were that looked into his own, how sweet and sensible the trembling lip; how natural she was, how simple, how free from all guile; how different to the worldly women and artificially trained girls he had known; how dearly she loved him! And, after all, what was to be compared to a loving, gentle heart?

He ought to be proud of his conquest, to be loved for himself, without any reference to his wealth, his position, his title. What could he ask better?

"I have won the sweetest face and the truest heart in England for my own," he said.

Yet there was a doubt upon him—a doubt he could not solve or understand.

When he reached home, he found cards on the library table. "The Duke of Ormescombe," "Captain Reid," "Major Fullarton."

"You have had visitors during my absence," he said to the butler.

"Yes, sir; the Duke of Ormescombe, and some military gentlemen. I placed the cards where you might see them."

He felt a great anxiety to see the duke, so much had

been said in praise of him. He was a man eminent for his statesmanlike qualities, for his great good sense and moderation. All parties looked up to him with respect and admiration. His wife, too, was considered one of the most accomplished and elegant of women. The Duchess of Ormescombe was the patroness of every charity worth patronizing. Her very name, people said, carried a blessing with it. There was no lady in England more admired or esteemed.

Then the duke's daughter, Lady Isora Morelton—Hubert had never met her, but he had heard of her graceful loveliness. He remembered with a smile that one paper had called her the fairest star of Victoria's Court. He had seen a portrait of her once, when she, with some of the noblest and fairest ladies of the land, officiated as bride-maid to a charming and lovely princess. But the portrait had given no fair idea of her. He heard many people laugh at the notion of it bearing even ever so slight a resemblance to Lady Isora.

He felt some little curiosity to see her, principally because his uncle had spoken of her with such enthusiasm—that of all England, Lord Arncourt had said, she would make him the best and fairest, the most suitable wife possible to find. He remembered the words as he stood there holding the cards in his hand.

"After all," he said to himself, "it is all nonsense. No man *can* tell the kind of wife suitable to another."

ted himself for it, yet he could not help the

thought—would it have been better for him to have waited until he had seen Lady Isora, before making any one else an offer of marriage? Then he trampled the idea under foot. He said to himself that it was disloyal. What was Lady Isora in comparison with that fair, innocent girl whose white arms had been clasped around his neck, whose sweet lips had touched his own.

That same evening, before he went to rest, he wrote what he called a very diplomatic letter to Lord Arncourt. He only supposed the case, and did not write boldly:

“I have seen a young girl, poor, obscure, and unknown, but lovely and good. She loves me, and I love her. May I marry her?”

He knew the disposition of his uncle too well to write in such a strain. He simply said :

“You are anxious for me to marry, I know. Suppose that I met here a girl without fortune or birth, and I fell in love with her, what should you say to such an engagement as that? Supposing that I wrote and told you that the happiness of my whole life depended on it. Be sure you answer me, for I wish to know.”

When that letter was written and sent he felt easier in his mind. Then on the following morning he thought to himself that he was bound in etiquette to go over to Hernely Court and return the duke's visit.

As he rode again through the sunlit, fragrant wood, with the perfume of wild flowers floating round him, all his doubts disappeared. The loveliest girl in England loved

him for his own sake—not because he was some day or other to be Lord Arncourt—the sweet, true, tender heart that was all his own. No wonder the sun shone and the birds sang; no wonder that the earth seemed very fair. Kings had often sighed for such a treasure as he had won, yet never obtained it. How he wished this visit to Hernely Court was ended, that he might go over to Neverstay! She would be sitting under the apple blossoms waiting for him, the sun shining on her golden head, and such love in her eyes as might win Peris from the gates of Paradise.

He forgot Lady Isora; her name hardly occurred to him during that ride. He reached Hernely Court at last, only to hear that the Duke of Ormescombe was not at home.

He looked slightly disappointed, thinking to himself this would necessitate another long journey. The footman told him that the duchess was at home and disengaged. Mr. Ruthven entered, and was shown into a magnificent drawing-room, where her grace of Ormescombe was sitting alone.

She welcomed him most kindly, and he felt at home with her at once. Hers was the very perfection of high breeding—the calm, sweet, tranquil elegance that instantly puts every one at ease. Mr. Ruthven felt a great admiration for her. Then she talked to him so sensibly about the country and all matters of interest connected with it; about himself—his position, his hopes. Hubert found himself talking to her confidently, happily, as he had never talked to a lady before.

"Shall you feel dull at Hernely Court?" he asked, suddenly.

She laughed.

"That question proves that you do not know the duke yet. It would be utterly impossible to be dull where he is. I always tell him that he takes London with him wherever he goes; he delights in a house full of people."

"To be sure; I remember now that he had visitors with him when he rode over to Neversleigh."

The duchess smiled again.

"We are supposed," she said, "to come into the country for quiet. Now imagine, Mr. Ruthven, the number of guests staying at the court."

"I could not possibly tell," he replied, thinking, as he spoke, that he had never seen any smile so sweet as hers.

"Seventeen," she said; "and, Mr. Ruthven, if you will pardon the short notice, and dine with us to-morrow, I shall have great pleasure in introducing you to all our friends."

Dine there to-morrow! that would be another day away from Alice; and the golden summer would soon be passing, the apple blossoms falling from the tree. He longed to catch the hours as they flew.

Then he recovered himself with a crimson flush. The duchess was looking at him and laughing.

"Your thoughts are straying," she said, with an air of kindly amusement. "Nay, do not apologize; every one wanders at times."

"I can only hope you will not think me very remiss," he said; "the fact is that the word to-morrow sent me off at a tangent." Then, as the only possible means of atoning for his rudeness, he added: "I cannot tell your grace with how much pleasure I accept your invitation."

"That is well," she replied, and he saw that she was pleased. "The duke has gone to show our visitors the ruins of Gore Abbey; they are said to be very fine. I forgot to ask you; do you know Lady Isora, my daughter, Mr. Ruthven?"

"I have not that pleasure," he replied.

"Most of our guests are riding with the duke. Lady Isora is with them. To-morrow I will introduce you to her."

He added a few complimentary words and then went away satisfied with his visit, and leaving the Duchess of Ormescombe equally pleased.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PASSING CLOUD.

It was with an exultant sense of freedom that he galloped off to the school-house at Neverstay. He remembered the gossip about his horse standing at the door, but he only laughed at it.

"People will soon see what it means," he said, "and then they will understand why I have been so often."

The schoolmaster was busy with his classes. Hubert looked into the school-room; it was hot and close, though the fragrance of mignonette floated in the open windows. Mr. Luttrell looked tired, and the noise of the children was slightly confusing.

Involuntarily Hubert Ruthven thought to himself how distasteful such a life of labor must be; how wearisome, how trying, to see the sunshine, the green meadows, the shady woods, yet to be tied to the desk after that fashion.

"Thank Heaven no work ties me," he said to himself; "I should bear it ill."

Then Mr. Luttrell said something to him, and Hubert replied pleasantly. No man ever lived who was less suspicious than the schoolmaster.

"It is a warm day, Mr. Ruthven," he said, "and you

look tired. Go into the house—Alice will give you some lemonade.”

“The very word has a refreshing sound,” said Hubert. “I shall want a long talk with you some day soon, Mr. Luttrell.”

The schoolmaster thought he meant on matters connected with the school ; he bowed gravely.

“I am at your service any time, Mr. Ruthven,” he replied ; and Hubert, singing softly to himself the old Scotch song, “My love she’s but a lassie yet,” went into the house.

He knew she would be in the garden. The cool, shady rooms were all empty, the white lace curtains moved in the wind, the flowers in the vases were all fresh and fragrant. He went out at the long French window. Oh ! how fair and sweet it was, fairer with all those old-fashioned flowers. There were the apple blossoms, pink and white, and fragrant, and underneath them the lovely, smiling face that had beguiled his heart from him.

She sprang up, with a glad cry of welcome.

“I thought you would come !” she said.

“Come, my darling ? why, of course I should come. Where else should I go ? You may rely upon it that wherever *you* are I shall come.”

“The morning is so beautiful ! It was bright before ; it seems doubly bright now. There must be some magic about you, Mr. Ruthven ; the moment you come in sight

the sunshine is full of gold, and the air of music, such a subtle change comes over the whole earth."

He smiled, though his heart was moved to its very depths.

"Those are your fancies, sweet."

"You look tired ; sit down here and I will get something for you. It seems to me almost a sin to spend these golden days indoors."

He never forgot the graceful little figure tripping about him, the sumptuous repast that she had prepared for him under the apple blossoms. There were large green leaves instead of golden plate, filled with ripe and juicy strawberries, ripe peaches and nectarines, a bunch of purple grapes, a glass of clear, sparkling lemonade, ripe cherries full of juice. He looked in amaze at the white, slender fingers arranging the beautiful fruit.

"Why, Alice," he said, "this is fit for a king."

"It is for a king," she said—"for *my* king ; and when he comes to visit me, surely he must have the best I can offer him."

She watched him while he drank the clear, cool lemonade.

"Do you like it?" she asked.

"I should be difficult to please if I did not. Certainly I do."

"I made it," she said, shyly, the blue eyes looking intensely at him. "I shall learn to make everything you like, Mr. Ruthven."

He laughed aloud ; the idea of his wife, the future mistress of Neversleigh, making lemonade, amused him greatly. Suddenly he stopped, and his laughter died away. It was just possible that if he made this girl his wife the abbey might never be his at all. She looked at him.

"Why do you laugh, then look so grave?" she asked.

"I was wondering, Alice, whether you would love me as well if I were a poor man—poor enough to be obliged to work—as you love me now that you believe me heir of Neversleigh?"

"Certainly," she replied, very promptly. "What difference would that make to love? It would make a great difference to comfort, though."

"In what way?" he asked, somewhat surprised.

"I should be frightened to death at that big house. Why, the very servants there are grander than the finest people I have ever known."

"Oh, Alice!" he cried, involuntarily.

"It is true. The housekeeper looks like a duchess, and the maids like——"

"My darling, did you ever see a duchess?" he asked, in a tone of grave remonstrance, with the memory of that stately lady he had just left upon him.

"No ; I do not know that I ever did," was the candid reply. "But I have an idea that all duchesses are very grand and stately, something like Mrs. Seldon. She *always* wears a black satin dress and a golden chain."

"The housekeeper ! Ah, well, Alice, you have noticed more than I have done."

She laughed, and poured out another glass of lemonade. He could not tell how it was, but her words had jarred upon him. He was loth to admit it, even to himself. In spite of their adorable simplicity, there seemed to him something vulgar about them, not to understand the difference between the dignity of a duchess and the "starched estate" of a housekeeper, to find the acme of splendor in a black satin dress and a gold chain. He shuddered a little, though she was so lovely and so loving.

"You will see what a duchess is like some day, Alice," he said ; "then you can judge better."

She was looking at him with earnest eyes—so earnest, he wondered a little.

"I vexed you just now," she said, gently. "I do not know what it is, but I feel sure that I have said something that has not pleased you."

He was about to deny it, but she laid her white hand on his lip.

"I *know* it, dear ; I know every line on your face ; if a bright thought flashes through your mind, I read it ; if it is a gloomy one, I read it ; and a few minutes since a cloud, just a little cloud, passed over your face, and I knew some careless word had brought it there. Do you know that I would rather die than vex you?"

The sweet red lips quivered, and the blue eyes filled with tears.

"My darling!" he cried, clasping her in his arms; "if you do that, I shall never forgive myself."

"But you were just a little disappointed or vexed at something I said?"

He kissed her over and over again.

"You could not vex me, darling," he said; and at that moment she looked so beautiful he really believed what he said. "You could not vex me, for your words are sweet and graceful as yourself."

He forgot the passing cloud. She was very quiet for a few minutes after, and clung to him with a wistful tenderness that touched his heart inexpressibly.

"I shall begin from now," she said, "and learn everything that will please you. Shall I ever be as clever as a fine lady, I wonder?"

"Alice, darling, do not say 'fine lady;' there is a sound about it that I do not like. A lady is always a lady, and can never be 'fine'——"

She interrupted him.

"Thank you for teaching me that," she said. "I shall always remember it. If you will only tell me what annoys you, I will be so careful."

Then he remembered that innate refinement was the only true teacher, and his corrections were, after all, useless. He contented himself by kissing the sweet, flower-like face, and spending the rest of the sunshiny morning in talking about love.

CHAPTER XII.

THE UNCLE'S REPLY.

"Shall you come to-morrow?" asked Alice of her lover, as he bade her adieu.

"I am afraid not. I have promised to dine at Hernely Court; and I fear that I shall not have time."

He could have laughed aloud at the awe and wonder that came into her beautiful blue eyes.

"Hernely Court! I' she repeated; "why, that is where the duke lives."

"Yes; and it is with the duke I am going to dine."

The lovely lips pouted.

"But he has such a beautiful daughter, Mr. Ruthven, so they say."

"And I believe it is true. Lady Isora is said to be a great beauty."

The little white hands clung round his arm, and the fair child-like face was raised to his.

"You will not like her best, will you?" she said.

It was impossible to resist bending down and kissing those sweet lips.

"You must not love her the best, because, although she

is Lady Isora, and very beautiful, she could not love you as I do; it would be impossible."

What young man was ever untouched by those words, whispered in the sweetest of voices, with a face like a summer flower bending over him.

"My darling, you need not fear! I did not wish to go at all, but I was compelled to promise. All the Lady Isoras in the world are nothing to me, compared to you. I love you, no one else."

The time was to come when he would remember those words.

Some hours later he stood, one of a brilliant number of guests, in the Hernely drawing-rooms. His thoughts were still rather in a maze; still, with the sweet face under the apple blossoms, he went through the usual introductions in the usual way.

"Society is always alike, go where you will," he thought.

The duke was exceedingly pleased to see him—the future lord of Neversleigh Abbey was the most important person in the neighborhood. The duchess was most affable, kind, and gracious, distributing her smiles and words, as a good hostess should, to all indiscriminately. Hubert was listening with some amusement to an argument between two officers when Lady Isora entered the room. He was not thinking of her at that moment; but by the slight stir, and the excited attention on every face, he saw that something out of the common way had hap-

pened. Hearing the rustle of a dress he turned round, and for the first time in his life saw Lady Isora Morelton.

A tall, beautiful, queenly vision, with rippling hair and bright eyes, with lips perfect as those of a Grecian goddess, and a face of the rarest patrician beauty. He did not know what her dress was, but that it was something white and shining, and fell like a luminous cloud about her; and the white pearls she wore were no whiter than the graceful neck and rounded arms; she had the prettiest shoes, her gloves were a marvel of art, her jeweled fan was perfection, and as she moved through the room, it seemed as though a ripple of light and subtle perfume followed her.

He had seen beautiful women—pretty girls, handsome matrons—but no one like her. She was unique. Then it seemed to him the sunshine was dazzling him; he felt giddy and faint, as though some strong perfume had passed over him—it was Lady Isora smiling as the duchess introduced him—but he was almost too bewildered to know what to say.

For a man of the world it was strange. Perhaps Lady Isora was accustomed to produce this effect upon people, for she did not remark it. She talked to him until the dazzle of her beauty wore away, and then he answered back.

But he smiled to himself afterward when she seated herself in a crimson velvet *fauteuil*, and one by one, all the "best men" in the room gathered round her. She was so like some gorgeous young queen surrounded by

her court, that he smiled to himself as he remembered his uncle's words.

"As though I could win her," he said to himself. "Why, a king might woo such a woman, and woo in vain. Win her, a girl so peerless, so gifted, whose smiles seemed to make Eden! No; it was not possible."

She was not worldly—not a mere society model. The duchess, by a most graceful gesture and half a word, signified to Mr. Ruthven that he was to take her daughter down to dinner. She laid her hand on his arm, and he thought of the little hands that had clung there so short a time since—thought of sweet Alice Luttrell, and sighed. Lady Isora looked up at him with a smile.

"Going down to dinner with a sigh!" she said. "Why, Mr. Ruthven, that is unusual."

She was laughing so frankly, that he felt quite at ease with her.

"The cause of the sigh is unusual, I candidly admit," he replied.

"I must not ask what it is," she said.

"No; I must pray you not, for if you told me to do anything, Lady Isora, I should be compelled to do it; and in this case, it would not be judicious."

"Then I will be generous, and *not* ask," she said.

It was no exaggeration to say that she charmed him. How could he have been so foolish as to think all women artificial and inane? Why, she was brighter than any one he had ever met; she reminded him of the girl in the

fairy tale, whose lips only opened to drop diamonds and pearls ; she was eloquent, witty, brilliant, and delightful.

He found himself wondering whom she would marry, what destiny would be high enough for her. Again, he found himself wondering *what* she would have said, and how he should have fared if *he had been free to woo her*.

"She would not have cared for me," he thought. "It would not have been possible ; she is a brilliant star, and I am not worthy of her."

He hardly remembered how the night passed ; it seemed to him that he woke up from a trance when he reached home, and found himself once more amid the familiar scenes of Neversleigh Abbey.

It was another day before the answer from Lord Arn-court came, and then the cool, cynical, wicked words made the young man's face flush with anger, and his heart beat with pain.

"I wonder, my dear nephew, that you should waste good ink and paper in asking me such a question. I answer it, 'If you were ever so far to forget what is due to me and to yourself as to contemplate such a marriage, I would disinherit you at once.' I should not wait an hour ; there is no doubt about it. Another thing is, that a poor, obscure girl would not *expect* marriage. I need say no more. I hear wonders of the Lady Isora, and shall be glad to know that you admire her. No more folly, Hubert. A wise man looks before he leaps."

CHAPTER XIII.

WHAT SHALL HE DO ?

Hubert Ruthven read his uncle's letter with a feeling of something like distraction ; he could not help feeling a dislike, a repulsion, for the man who could so coolly suggest injustice.

"Not expect marriage!" he cried. "Why, I would not stain my soul with the blight of a fair life like that for all the wealth of the world."

He felt indignant. (Vice is not always welcome to the young, the hopeful, the sanguine ; any amount of romance, of poetry, even of nonsense—but vice, it shocks and jars.

"Bring clouds of sorrow and shame to that lovely face? No! not for a hundred earldoms!—not for kingdoms!"

"Whatever else happens," he said to himself, "I am a man of honor, and it will not be *that*."

The matter lay very clearly before him. He knew perfectly well that if he did marry Alice Luttrell he would never succeed his uncle ; he would lose Neversleigh Abbey and the fortune that he had been taught to consider his own ; he would have no prospect before him but bare, bleak poverty ; Lord Arncourt would never pardon such a marriage.

He must choose between the two, and, though he did not know it, it was a certain sign that he was not very deeply in love, or he would not have hesitated an instant ; kings have thrown away a kingdom before now for love.

On the day following he received another letter from his uncle, more cynical, more repulsive even, than the first.

"I thought it better," wrote Lord Arncourt, "to supplement my letter by a few remarks. People say there is no man so foolish as a cynic. I do not think so. That I can sneer, and sneer well, at my fellow-creatures, is to me a matter of great self-congratulation. However, that is beside the matter. What I want to say to you is this : Do not be misled by any absurd idea about love. Credit me, all women are alike ; six months after marriage you will not care whether you married the woman you fancied yourself dying for, or one quite indifferent. What you young men call love, and think half-divine, is but a fever—a foolish, fretting fever. It always wears out. Now, if this be the case—and you have the word of a philosopher for it—why put yourself out of the way ? If it cannot possibly matter what woman you marry, why not choose one who can bring you what you want—distinction, high connection, political influence—who can materially advance your interests in life ? Why throw yourself away upon one who, instead of bringing you anything, lowers you socially, and makes you ashamed of yourself every hour of your life, after the first foolish enchantment is over ? I have met many men in my life whom I have pitied, but none whom

I pitied so much as the man who has married an ill-bred woman.

"Of course, my dear Hubert, these are but little hints that I throw out for your consideration. You are at perfect liberty to choose for yourself. You have been brought up to consider yourself my heir. If you should prefer this kind of marriage, by all means marry. I do not like Eric Chilvers, but on this score I should feel perfectly safe with him.

"I shall not allude to this matter again, unless I hear from you that you prefer marriage to an inheritance. I shall consider that common sense has guided you, and you have given up all such absurd ideas."

Hubert Ruthven read this letter with even greater dissatisfaction than the former one. But if he had felt the devoted, passionate love for Alice Luttrell that he had imagined himself to feel, he would not have hesitated one moment; but over this love, in his own mind, there was always a doubt—a half-lingering doubt he could neither explain nor understand.

When he was with her, her fascination completely conquered him; he remembered nothing except that he loved her, and that she was the fairest and most loving creature. Away from her, reason had full sway; he could doubt and wonder whether the dream was a wise one—whether the spell would hold.

Only a few short weeks ago, and he was bright, happy,

and careless as the summer hours ; now he was full of doubt and perplexity.

"Was I not happier before love came into my heart at all?" he said. And if he had been a little wiser the fact that he could ask himself that question would have convinced him that he was not in love at all—that he was simply mistaking a boyish fancy, a pretty, fantastic delusion, for love.

At last he bethought himself that, as Alice was to be the principal party concerned, he would do well to consult her—to tell her his difficulties, and see what she thought. He found her—not at home—but gathering the dewy, blue forget-me-nots from the brookside.

He did not see her at first, and was walking hastily by, when she called his name in a sweet, low voice, and turning round he saw her.

"Alice," he cried, "how glad I am to meet you here ! I was going down to your house. I wanted to talk to you."

"I am trespassing," she said. "All the time I have been gathering these flowers I have been saying to myself, 'These are Neversleigh Woods, the property of my Lord Arncourt ; no trespassers allowed.' You will not prosecute me for gathering a few wild flowers, will you?"

"I am so glad to see you, Alice ; I want to talk to you."

"Not about anything *serious*?" she replied, pleadingly.

"Yes, about something very serious," he replied.

"Ah, me!" said the girl. "If the world were but less grave—if life were more like this summer morning!"

"It ought to be always a summer morning to you," he said.

"So it will be, if my sun shines," she answered, looking at him with loving eyes.

He felt the old charm beginning to work.

"Women ought not to have such beautiful eyes," thought the poor young fellow. "What can a man do?"

She was pointing with her white hand to a beautiful willow tree that had drooped over the brook.

"Under the shade of that willow," she said, "there is the prettiest, coziest nook in the world. I have been sitting there until the water sung me to sleep. Let us go there. How nice it must be to own a real wood like this, where no trespassers can come!"

He followed her, and they sat under the branches of the drooping willow; the little brook sang so sweetly to them; bright-eyed birds sang a few notes, looked at them fearlessly, then flew away; the flowers bloomed around them, and the fragrant wind whispered of love.

"How beautiful!" said Alice. "Oh, Hubert, do not waste these sunny hours talking about your cold, serious matters; do learn a lesson from the birds and the flowers!"

"And talk to you of nothing but love," he replied, laughingly.

"What could suit the morning better?" she asked;

and Hubert agreed with her. The spell was working, the doubts and perplexities rapidly clearing away; she was so lovely and so loving. Suddenly his eyes fell upon a book bound in blue and gold, and he bent down to look at it.

"Have you been reading, Alice?" he asked.

"Yes; I came here to study, but the brook and the birds would not let me," she answered, gravely.

"What book is it?" he asked.

Suddenly her beautiful face flushed the deepest crimson; she looked terribly distressed.

"You must not look at it," she cried. "I did not intend you to see it."

She placed one hand over the title so that he could not see it.

"What a little hand!" he said; "and how white it is!" He took it away, and read: "Guide to Etiquette; Rules for Behavior in the Highest Society."

Then, despite the gravity of the situation, Hubert Ruthven laughed aloud. He could not imagine the future Lady Arncourt learning manners from this little blue book!

CHAPTER XIV.

"I SHALL DIE IF I LOSE YOU."

"Now," she said, half-tearfully, "you will be vexed with me again. I only want to please you. I want to be just like those ladies you saw at Hernely. I want to talk like them, and do just as they do."

"You will not find out the method here," he said, turning over the pages with great amusement. "Never mind about imitating any one, Alice; believe me, you are best and dearest as you are."

She looked delighted; her face cleared, and her beautiful eyes grew bright.

"Do I please you?" she asked, quietly, looking so winning as she spoke, he could not help clasping his arms round her, and kissing the sweet, flower-like face.

"Most certainly you do," he replied. "I have given you plenty of proof, I think."

"I am so glad!" she cried; "oh, so glad! I shall not care now; I shall not trouble myself about the 'Guide to Etiquette' any more; but I should like always to be polite, Hubert, you know."


"Certainly; so you are. Women, especially beautiful women, are sweet and gracious by nature."

She was happy as a child.

"I did not think ladies spoke always in the stiff, formal way this book represents ; and you like me best as I am, Hubert, really and truly?"

His answer was very delightful ; but was not given in words.

"Now, Alice," he said, "put away the little book, dear, and listen to me. I want to talk very seriously to you. All the happiness of our lives is at stake."

It was almost pitiful to see how the light died out of her face.  She was but a butterfly, poor child, born to bask in sunshine and fragrance, and to die when all bright things faded away. There was none of the sterner, grander elements of womanhood in her. She was made to be loved, caressed, and indulged, not to be the companion of a man's life in the higher sense of the word. 7

"You are going to tell me something very sad. I know it by the expression of your face."

"It is simply this, Alice : I told you that I should write to my uncle and see what he said about our marriage. I have done so, and I want to tell you about his reply."

She drew nearer to him, and the little white hands clung to his arm as though she would hold him against all the world.

"My uncle is a very proud man, Alice, and not a good man, I fear, though I do not wish to shock you with that. He does not believe in love——"

"Not believe in love?" she interrupted, in such horrified tones, he could not help smiling.

"No; neither in love nor marriage. He has the strangest ideas. He thinks it does not matter in the least whom you marry; and, in short, my darling Alice, he will not hear one word of *our* marriage."

Her face turned so deadly white he thought she was going to die. Her lips lost all their color, and she trembled like a leaf on a tree. She opened her lips as though she were going to speak, then the sounds died away upon them.

"Alice, Alice, my darling!" he cried. "Do not, for Heaven's sake, do not look like that!"

"I shall die if I lose you," she said, hoarsely. "All my life has gone into yours. If I thought for one moment that I should lose you, do you know what I would do?"

"No, my darling."

"I would throw myself into the brook there, before your face. I am only a child, I know, in years; but it is no child's love that I have given to you. I am poor, ignorant, inexperienced; but I love you—I love you with a terrible love. I cannot lose you; I would rather die with you any death, any torture, rather than lose you. Oh, forgive me! I should not say all this, but I hardly know what I am saying."

He looked at her in wonder. The very character of her face seemed changed; the child-like simplicity had gone out of it; deep, undying passion shone there now, and

filled the beautiful eyes with light. He began to understand that in that soul he had awakened there were depths he had not penetrated. She had caught his hand in her own, and covered it with kisses and tears.

"From the first," she said, "from the first moment you came to me, from the first moment that your eyes smiled into mine, it was as though some great king, some great hero, had stooped from his high estate to love one far beneath him. Though your face and your voice haunted me all day and all night, still I said to myself that it would be madness to love you, because you were so far above me. Then, when I found that I could not help loving you, I thought I would worship you all my life, as the Persians do the sun. I never dreamed of *your* loving me, but I used to think how the greatest pleasure of my life would be watching you as you rode by, and reading about you when you should be a great man. I never dreamed of your loving me; it would have seemed to me less wonderful had the sun bowed down to the stars. I said to myself, 'I must be careful that no one in the wide world shall even guess at my secret;' and I would have kept it. I would have loved you from a far-off distance, but that you said you loved me. Then I let my whole heart and all my thoughts go out to you. I cannot take them back. You have been heart of my heart, soul of my soul—I cannot lose you."

She buried her face in her hands, and flung herself with passionate tears on the ground; but he raised her, and kissed her tears away.

"You will never like me again," sobbed she. "I know that I ought not to talk in this way—the ladies of your world do not—but my heart must speak, and it can only speak through my lips, you know."

"My dearest Alice, my darling, you mistake; indeed you mistake. Could I do anything else but love you? Do not weep; there is no need. We will not be parted. Listen to me."

"We must not be parted now," she said, "unless you wish me to die."

She had never looked more lovely; the pouting, beautiful lips, the eyes filled with tears, the sweet face all aglow with passion and tenderness.

"You have not heard all, Alice," said her lover. "Lord Arncourt *cannot* part us—no one in the wide world can do that."

"Then why did you frighten me so dreadfully?" she asked, beginning to smile again.

"Lord Arncourt cannot part us, but, if we are married, he will disinherit me."

"You will not mind that, shall you?" she asked, eagerly. He could not help smiling again at her simplicity.

"I think I should mind it, Alice; for you see that I have been brought up to be Lord of Neversleigh; that has always been the future worked out for me. I have no fortune of my own—not one shilling—and my uncle, always intending me to be his heir, has never had me educated for any profession. If I were disinherited, Alice, I should

not be able to get even a living like your father's. I should be the poorest of the poor."

"It would be cruel to you," she said. "I would not let you lose Neversleigh for my sake. There is only one thing that we can do, Hubert."

"What is it, my darling?"

"We must wait. You must not disobey or anger your uncle; it will not do. We love each other; we are very happy with our love. There is no need to look further yet. I should be happier waiting all my life for you than if I were married to some great king!"


"But we may have to wait half a lifetime," he said.

"Never mind, that will not matter. What can be better or happier? We can see each other sometimes. I can write to you; you can write to me. We shall be just as happy as we are now."

"Even if it be for thirty years?" he said.

"Time is as nothing to those who love," she said, with unconscious poetry.

So the morning that had seemed so perplexing to him ended happily. They were to love each other always, and to wait in patience until the time should come when that love might be avowed in full light of day.



CHAPTER XV.

"I WILL BE TENDER AND TRUE TO YOU."

Lord Arncourt smiled to himself as he drank his rare wine and looked over his cameos. His favorite nephew was a man of sense after all ; he had written several times, but there was no more mention of a love affair.

"He is cured," thought his lordship, with a cynical smile ; "it is astonishing, after all, how a man in love may be brought to reason. I have no doubt but that when I return I shall have some story of the disappearance of some village beauty. I shall know what it means ; there is nothing like philosophy after all."

So for a time there was a calm. Hubert went frequently to the school-house, and but few days passed without his seeing Alice. Yet Hubert Ruthven was far from happy ; he did not like the concealment, the clandestine meetings, the secrecy, the part he was compelled to play. He was an honorable man, and there seemed to him something very dishonorable in the whole affair. Yet how to alter it he did not know. As the days, weeks, and months passed by, he owned to himself that he had been foolish ; that he had mistaken a boyish infatuation, a passing

fancy, for love ; yet that his word was pledged now, and, at the price of his life's happiness, he must keep it.

How the story would have ended can never be known—fate interfered again.

One morning Hubert said to himself that on the day following he would go over to Neverstay and tell his story to Mr. Luttrell ; it would ease his mind and his conscience, he thought. That same evening word was brought to him that the schoolmaster had fallen down dead in the school.

All the consequences of this event did not at once present themselves to him. Of course he went over to Neverstay, and found Alice paralyzed with grief. The lovely, child-like, smiling girl had never seen death before, and her grief was terrible to witness. He found her by her father's bedside, from whence she refused to move. She took no notice of him ; his presence seemed of no account to her. She did not even hear him when he spoke. She only cried for her father, who was never more to listen to her cries, or to wipe away her tears.

Hubert did all that was possible. He sent to the village for some kind-hearted woman to remain with her ; he superintended all the arrangements for the funeral. He was present at the inquest, and heard the decision of the jury :

“Died of disease of the heart.”

Then he wondered what he was to do next. Alice

was not quite penniless—her father had saved a hundred pounds.

"It would buy her mourning, and set her up in the world," said the kind-hearted neighbors; but they did not know the story of Alice's love.

The first time he met her after her father's death the inmost depths of his heart were moved. She had always been so bright, so smiling, so animated; she had been so radiant in her love and her happiness. Now she was pale and sad, with quivering lips and weeping eyes.

"Alice, my darling!" he cried; "shall you *never* smile again?"

She clung to him as a weeping child to its mother.

"I was so happy," she sobbed, "only three weeks since; and now I have lost all in the world."

"Not quite all," he said; "I am left to you."

"But I must lose you, too," she said. "Oh, Hubert, I did not think of that at first, and it is just as well—it would have killed me."

"Why must you lose me, my darling? I don't understand. I thought to love you all the better, so as to make up to you for your loss."

"They have been telling me that I shall have to leave the cottage—the pretty home where I have been so happy. Some one else is coming. There will have to be another schoolmaster, and I cannot stay."

He said to himself how blind and stupid he had been

not to think of that. Of course the poor child must seek a fresh home.

"But, Alice," he said, wonderingly, "where shall you go? What shall you do?"

"I cannot tell," she answered. "One says I had better be a governess; another that I had better learn something by which I could get a living. Oh, Hubert, all my happy life I have been living like the flowers, without a thought as to 'laboring and spinning.' I never thought of my father's death; it never occurred to me that he would die and leave me."

"Are you quite alone in the world?" asked Hubert, thoughtfully. "Have you no friends, no relations—none of what in homely country phrase is called 'mother's kin?'"

She shook her head sadly.

"I believe that I am quite alone," she said. "When I have left you I shall be among strangers."

"What plan did you think of yourself?" he asked.

"I do not know," and the blue eyes were raised hopelessly to his. "I suppose I must do as other orphan girls do—go away, go and teach some children. There is one comfort for me—my heart will soon break, away from you. Oh, Hubert, Hubert, I love you so! can you do nothing to make me happier?"

She clasped her arms round his neck, hiding her golden head on his breast, weeping bitter, passionate tears. His face grew very pale and grave; he trembled, and his heart

beat. Her very loneliness, her sorrow, her desolation, appealed to him as nothing else could have done; all his better, kinder feelings were aroused.

"I can do one thing for you, my darling, if you will permit me," he said. "I will make you my wife."

"Your wife! But, Hubert, that would ruin you."

"No; we must manage better than that," he replied.

"I hardly like to suggest it to you, Alice, now that you are so lonely, but if you would consent to a private marriage, we should have no more difficulty. Would you do that?"

"Yes," she whispered, faintly; "anything rather than be separated from you."

"Then it shall be so. We can be married in London, and I will take you abroad. You will not mind living abroad?"

"Anything rather than leave you," she repeated.

"Then it shall be so. I could not bear the thought of your going out into the bleak, wide world, to teach strange children. I could not bear to think of these little white hands working for bread. If you will be my wife, my darling, I will be tender and true to you—tender and true."

"I can hardly believe it," she murmured; "it seems too good to be true."

"Tell every one who speaks to you about it that you are going to live with friends," he said. And then he hastened away from her to make the necessary arrangements.

CHAPTER XVI.

"I WILL TRUST YOU ANYWHERE."

In after years it was all like a dream to him ; the hurried journey to London ; the dark, misty morning ; the old gray church by the river-side, where one saw everything through a fog, as it were, a dim yellow light that seemed to float through the aisles and cling to the pillars ; the clergyman who went through the ceremony in an indifferent kind of manner, as though everything in the way of births, deaths, and marriages was so much a matter of course to him that it was hardly worth a thought—a clergyman with a drawling, tuneless voice that seemed to give no meaning to the sacred words he uttered ; the two witnesses, one a pew-opener, and the other a sexton—he had not dared to take any friend or servant of his own.

Then came a hurried drive through London streets ; a dim, half-feverish dream of the long railway ride, with the sweet face by his side ; then of the blue Channel waters, with the sun shining on the coast of France ; of a rapid sail over the smooth sea, with the waves chanting the burden of a love story in his ear ; of landing in the fair country of France, with his young wife by his side, and making a home there.

These memories returned to him in after years just as one hears the sound of half-forgotten music in a dream.

A home ! The word means so much ; but in his case it was not what it is with others. A happy home is a paradise. Married life, where the marriage is in every respect equal, one of true love, resembles the life of Eden. But Hubert Ruthven did not find the paradise that he had anticipated.

For some few months, while the summer and the sunshine lasted, with the magic of fragrant flowers, and the singing birds, all was well ; half the charm lay in the lovely season, and half in the beautiful face of his young wife ; but when the golden light of the summer faded, and he began to know by heart every change on that most fair face, he grew slightly wearied of it.

The truth was that Alice was not his equal. Had the difference lain solely in birth and wealth, it would not have mattered ; it was of far deeper import.

Intellectually, she was greatly his inferior. She had a certain kind of poetry and passion about her that had charmed him ; but there was nothing to sustain the charm. She was wanting, too, in the polished refinement, in the exquisite good breeding, he had been accustomed to admire.

It is a great mistake to imagine that men can waste any great or vehement affection on a pretty face, unless there be either a beautiful soul or a beautiful mind with it. It charms for a short time, but the charm is soon ended ;

then, unless there are higher and nobler qualities to take its place, the love dies with the glamour. Who cares to open continually the pages of a well-known book. Once well known, and the need for reading it ceases.

So it is with human beings; a slight character, feeble, fragile, easily understood, soon loses all power to interest or charm, and satiety follows. >

Alice Ruthven was young, beautiful, with a poetry and tenderness about her that were infinitely charming; but when she had looked her fairest, when she had told her husband over and over again, in sweetest words, how dearly she loved him, when she had put her most tender thoughts into most tender and loving words, all was over. She had no intellectual charm; and she half-shocked him more often than he cared to own by some action or careless expression to which he, one of the most fastidious of men, was quite unaccustomed.

A few weeks after his hasty and ill-advised marriage, Hubert Ruthven knew that he had destroyed the happiness of his own life.

"She shall never know it," he said to himself. "I will make her happy, even if I never know another day's happiness myself. She shall not know I repent. She shall not know that I am wearied already of a tie that can never be broken again in life. I have brought my fate upon myself. I have erred in concealment, and I must abide by the consequences."

So he devoted himself, with a heroism worthy of a better

cause, to his young wife. He remained abroad all summer, and she never found out that he was weary of her. It was impossible not to be touched by her tenderness. She would clasp her white arms round his neck; and tell him that he made all her happiness, all her sunshine; that he was a king and a hero—sweetest praise from lips we love, but not so sweet from lips that tire us.

Hubert Ruthven hardly knew whether it was a relief or a disappointment to him when he received a short, peremptory letter from Lord Arncourt, worldly and cynical as usual.

"My dear nephew," it ran, "you will not, in all probability, thank me if I ask *why* you are loitering so long on the Continent? Youth has its secrets; I never inquire into them. Youth has its engrossing pursuits; I never care to interfere with them. I hope sincerely that you have been following the light of bright eyes, or the wave of a white hand; there is no distraction more pleasing than such a pursuit. But—and here I speak seriously—at this juncture England needs all her best and bravest sons. There is much work to be done. There is a seat in Parliament awaiting you, and you must support Lord L—— in those measures which are really so beneficial to the country at large. Let me see you at Neversleigh at the end of the week."

Long after he read that letter Hubert Ruthven sat absorbed in thought. He had all his life longed for such an opening as this. He was pondering deeply, anxiously,

when the clasp of two soft white arms round his neck disturbed him.

"Hubert, you are thinking of some very grave matter," said a sweet voice. "Tell me what it is."

And, simply because he was taken by surprise, he told her. Her beautiful face grew very wistful and sad as she listened.

"You must not give up your career for my sake, Hubert," she said, slowly. "You have sacrificed much time to me. I must be content, even though you should be obliged to leave me. Nothing can take away the happy consciousness that I am your wife."

He had not expected such heroism from her.

"Have you remembered, Alice, that if I leave you now to do my uncle's bidding, it is very uncertain when I may be able to join you again?"

"I must not think of that. I must remember nothing except that a good wife never stands in her husband's light. I can give you nothing. I can do nothing. But at least I can show you how much I love you by letting you go."

He looked down on the sweet, pale face.

"Do you really mean this, Alice?" he asked again.

"Yes," she smiled faintly. "You must go, Hubert. You must make a name so famous that when your uncle comes to know who shares it, he may forgive me for the sake of the glory that covers you."

"But, Alice, darling, he will never know," was the grave reply. "I shall never dare to tell him."

"Then we must do the best we can; I will not be a stumbling-block to you. Nothing can alter the fact that I am your wife. I shall try to be worthy of you—to be brave as you."

It was something of a relief to him that the offer of the sacrifice came from her.

"You will not mind my leaving you alone, Alice, uncertain as to my going and coming? You will trust me in far-off England?"

The light on her face was beautiful to see.

"I would trust you anywhere, Hubert. The last thing that will distress me will be a doubt of you. I shall have no room in my heart for it—no room for anything save blessings and prayers, and faithful love."

And as he accepted the sacrifice from her, he said to himself:

"There is something grand about Alice after all."

Ten days afterward he was delighting Lord Arncourt by working hard to secure his (Hubert's) election.

CHAPTER XVII.

"I SHALL ALWAYS REMEMBER YOU."

More and more dream-like became the marriage, and the few months that followed it. Alice Ruthven was left in the fair land of France, in one of the prettiest houses in Provence, a pretty little villa, under the shadow of trailing vine-leaves—a home where sunshine and beauty did their best; where sweetest flowers ever blossomed, and the sky was ever smiling. She wanted for nothing. From the income that Lord Arneourt allowed him, Hubert Ruthven made ample provision for her. True, that in order to do so, he was obliged to submit to many privations; but that he did cheerfully. If his whole income would have made up to her for his waning love, he would have cheerfully laid it at her feet. Besides this sum that was sent to her regularly as the day came round, there was rarely a week passed without his sending her books, music, dresses—anything that he thought would please her, and show how continually she lived in his thoughts.

The meeting between Lord Arneourt and his nephew was most cordial. Hubert was congratulated upon his improved appearance. Then they began to speak of more serious matters.

"You were always desirous of doing something for yourself," said Lord Arncourt; "this is your golden opportunity. Assist Lord L—— in the passing of this measure, on which his heart is fixed, and your career is certain. I should think there can be no doubt of your election?"

"If hard work can guarantee my return, it is sure," he replied; "for I shall leave nothing undone that can secure it."

"You must get the Duke of Ormescombe's interest. Since he purchased Hernely Park, he leads the county. His influence will carry you through anything. You must also try to persuade the duke's daughter, Lady Isora, to take an interest in your election," he continued. "There is not a young squire or farmer that will say nay to her."

"I should fancy that political feeling was higher than mere admiration for feminine beauty," said Hubert.

"Should you?" replied Lord Arncourt. "Ah, my dear nephew, on that subject, as on many others, you have much to learn. You are going to Hernely Castle. Ask Lady Isora to be kind enough to grace your colors by wearing them, and to make you some favors—knots of ribbon and rosettes; then you will see how far what you are pleased to call feminine beauty exceeds mere political feeling."

On the morning following Hubert rode over to Hernely, and was most warmly welcomed by the duke and

duchess. He inquired after Lady Isora, and was told she was out sketching in the park. Then he spoke to the duke about the object of his coming, and was delighted to find that all the Hernely influence would be exerted in his favor. The duke was pleased to be most complimentary to him.

"I am always delighted," he said, "to see young men of your age anxious to serve their country. You will make a name for yourself, quite independently of the title you inherit. If I could be young over again, I should be more ambitious than I have been hitherto."

Before leaving the castle, Hubert accepted an invitation to dine there on the following day. Then he bade farewell to the duke and duchess.

As he rode home through the park, he thought of Alice—her sweet, pleading face, her wistful eyes, her gentle, tender, loving manner. He tried to make his heart warm with pleasant memories of her; but, despite himself, despite all that he could do, there was the terrible sensation of a great weight, of an unpleasant secret, that must in time destroy him.

The golden sun shone above his head, the light came slanting through the trees, the fragrant flowers bloomed beneath his feet, the wind whispered, the birds sang, but Hubert rode on, blind to all beauty, buried in his own sad thoughts concerning his secret marriage.

He was roused by the shying of his horse, who was frightened by the baying of a hound. Looking through

the trees whence the sound proceeded, he saw a picture that never died from his mind. A beautiful girl seated near a stately group of oak trees, all the materials for sketching lying around her, and a magnificent hound stretched out at her feet.

She looked up as the deep growl was repeated, and when she saw Hubert Ruthven, a deep flush covered her face. She rose instantly, and then Hubert recognized Lady Isora.

He sprang from his horse and held out his hand to her. He could not help the sudden delight that flashed into his eyes and trembled on his lips.

"Mr. Ruthven," said Lady Isora, "I did not know that you had returned. Were you going to ride over us? Lion, for shame! you ought to know my friends."

She laid her white hand on the hound's shaggy coat, while she looked up into Hubert's face with a smile that dazzled and bewildered him.

"Lion ought to have known better than to have barked at you," she continued. "I must apologize for him."

"Perhaps it is his method of bidding me welcome," said Hubert, laughing. "I have been over to the castle, and I have a great favor to ask of you, Lady Isora."

"We will make this a hall of audience then," she replied, sitting down again under the trees. "And, Mr. Ruthven, pray let me say it will be difficult for you to ask a favor that I shall not feel great pleasure in granting."

She looked up at him with such kindly eyes—with such

a bright beam of welcome on her face, that he was inexpressibly touched.

"How kind you are to me," he said, taking a seat by her side; "I am quite touched by your goodness, Lady Isora."

"If Lion here could speak, he would tell you that I never forget old friends."

"I should hardly dare to claim admittance even in the most humble rank of Lady Isora's friends," he replied.

"Have you forgotten how we talked the first and only time we met?" she said, laughingly. "I shall always remember *you*, because I said more to you than I ever did to a stranger. I was quite ashamed when I came to think it over."

"I can only hope that you will repeat the kindness," he said; and Lady Isora's beautiful eyes drooped shyly from his.

If he had been a little vainer—if he had had a better opinion of himself—if he had been more worldly, and more of a gallant, he would have read correctly the language of those eyes, he would have understood why the lips trembled, why the little white hands were hidden from him.

But he was not vain, and he never dreamed that the beautiful, high-born girl remembered him.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"SHE IS A NOBLE WOMAN!"

Had Lady Isora and Mr. Ruthven met in a drawing-room, they would have been pleased to see each other, cordial and unaffected in their intercourse; but meeting here, out in the woods, gave a charm to the interview nothing else could have added. Hubert found himself opening his own mind to Lady Isora as he had never done to any one before. He found himself confiding to her the ambition that yet was not all "ambition's sake"—telling her how he had always longed for a life that should be distinguished, and to leave its record behind it.

"You do not think such ambition is wrong, Lady Isora?" he said.

She raised her beautiful, noble face to his, her eyes bright with grand thoughts, her lips trembling with the eloquent words that rushed to them.

"I?" she replied. "When a man's ambition is noble, then ambition becomes a grand passion. It is one I can sympathize so entirely with. I can understand the grandeur of devoting one's life to a great object. Women have no such happiness. I should like to devote *my* life to a life filled with noble projects."

Her words were so frank and open, so entirely devoid of all personal reference, that he could not help seeing that they were spoken without one thought of him, still they made him tremble as words had never done before.

An hour passed, and it seemed to him swifter than a minute. Lady Isora took out her pretty little watch and uttered a cry of surprise as she saw the time.

"The bell will have rung for luncheon," she said, "and they will think I am lost. You are going to dine with us to-morrow, Mr. Ruthven?"

He muttered something about having that pleasure; but he did not know himself what he was saying.

"We will finish our conversation then," she said; "and in the meantime take my promise that I will work hard to help you, and shall rejoice with all my heart in your success."

Then, with a few more graceful words, she bade him adieu, and he stood, hat in hand, watching her as she walked, with her proud, graceful step, down the long avenue of trees.

Well, he had seen her again! He knew that he should so see her. What need to feel this bewildering surprise? There was nothing new to him in the queenly, womanly beauty, in her magnificent intelligence, the quickness of intellect, her bright, poetical fancy. He had met her before, and had owned to himself that she was worthy to be wooed and won by a king. What need to stand there like one entranced? He had a wife, a fair, gentle, loving

girl, as unlike this grand woman as a purple violet is unlike a passion-flower.

"Heaven bless her!" he said; "she is a noble woman!" Then he mounted his horse again, and rode home through the smiling summer woods.

Lord Arncourt was much pleased with his nephew's account of his visit to Hernely.

"If the duke takes up your cause in earnest," he said, "your election is sure. Did you see the Lady Isora?"

The master of Neversleigh smiled to himself as he noted his nephew's confusion, and heard that he had overtaken the lady in the park, and had had a long conversation with her.

"I hear no more about the village love," thought the cynical old nobleman; "it must have all died away. Lady Isora will win, and I shall live to see Hubert one of the first men in England after all. The name of Arncourt will live in the annals of the land."

He was wary and wise enough never to mention the name of his "village love" to Hubert. "Better to let him forget all about it," he thought, "and throw him as much as possible into Lady Isora's society."

On the day following, Hubert went to Hernely Castle, and there found that the duke had already been working hard for him. He had secured some of the best votes and most influential men. His success was certain.

Lady Isora met him with the frank welcome of an old friend, and as he saw the deference paid to her, the homage

offered to her, he owned that his uncle had been perfectly right ; in all England he could have chosen no other lady who would have made him so beautiful, so earnest, so true, so suitable a wife—and this he found out *too late*.

CHAPTER XIX.

"THIS WILL NOT BE DENIED ME."

The election, thanks to the influence of the Duke of Ormescombe and the charms of his lovely daughter, was won. Hubert Ruthven was duly returned member for the ancient and time-honored borough of Neversleigh.

Lord Arncourt was delighted. To Lady Isora, who was radiant with triumph, Lord Arncourt was courtesy and deference itself. His shrewd eyes saw that to which Hubert was completely blind—the fact of the young girl's real and great liking for him.

"It will, perhaps, be better for me not to interfere," he said to himself. "Let them take their own time, go their own road; it will come right in the end. Hubert *cannot* resist loving a woman so beautiful and gifted as Lady Isora."

If he had known that his nephew had married the schoolmaster's daughter after all, he would most certainly have disinherited him; so that it was well for Mr. Ruthven that he kept his secret.

Time passed on, and the new member from Neversleigh began to be known as a power in the land. His maiden speech was considered one of the grandest pieces

of oratory known since the days of Chatham. Political leaders consulted him, and were unfeignedly glad of his opinion and his support. He wrote several pamphlets on the leading questions of the day, which were considered invaluable. In short, Lord Arncourt had every reason to be proud of his nephew, and proud he was.

Nothing is more delightful to the young than well-earned success such as his ; but those who looked deeper than the mere surface, found in the talented young member, the gifted orator, the rising young man of the day, a vein of sadness and of melancholy that was difficult to understand.

Lady Isora was one of the first to observe this. True, he loved his wife after a fashion. She looked lovely enough, her sweet face and golden head framed by the pink and white apple-blossoms. She had charmed him by her artless tenderness, she had quoted pretty poems to him, and he had mistaken all this for genius ; but of power to sympathize with, or even understand the loftier aims of his life, she had none. It was much to be feared that in the eyes of pretty, simple, rustic Alice, the Parliament House resembled a bear-garden, rather than anything else. She did not understand such dry affairs as were discussed there. So, when Mr. Ruthven talked to his wife of those hopes that made life so pleasant to him, of the plans that made the future so fair, she, who should have been vitally interested, thought of a thousand other things. He, looking into her face, hoping it would kindle

into enthusiasm, could not fail to notice its dreamy, absorbed expression, could not fail to see that her thoughts were not his.

Gradually he ceased to speak to her of those hopes ; his thoughts became more centered in himself ; he ceased to look to his wife for sympathy in his ideas, and a shadow, that was at first so slight as to be hardly perceptible, grew between them, and finally parted them.

Now he was in the very flush of success—everything had gone well with him ; fame and fortune lavished their brightest gifts upon him ; but he had that to bear which would darken his life as clouds darken the summer sky.

He learned the bitter truth in time—the truth that mars a life as nothing else can ; the truth that seared his heart as with an iron hand. He learned that the true, deep love of his life was given, *not* to the pretty, loving, gentle wife whom he had married out of compassion, but to the noble girl whose sweetest words and brightest smiles were all for him.

An honorable man, despite his one fault, he determined to fly from danger, to go where he would no more see the noble face, or hear the voice whose lightest tones thrilled his heart. He would do as brave men had done before him—fly from danger. He told Lord Arncourt that he should greatly prefer living in London, and his uncle, almost sullenly, consented.

“*That* does not look as though he cared much for Lady Isora,” thought the disappointed nobleman ; “surely,

when every other wish has been granted, this will not be denied me."

Hubert Ruthven never forgot the day on which he announced his intention to Lady Isora. He had gone over to Hernely, meaning to keep his secret faithfully—nothing was further from his thoughts than betraying it. He found Lady Isora alone; the duke and duchess had gone out; and he remembered the day as long as he lived, because it was the day on which he betrayed his own secret and discovered hers. There was a flush of golden sunlight on the sky—the white lilies were tinged with it, the roses reveled in it, the birds rejoiced over it, even Hubert Ruthven felt the weight at his heart grow less as he passed into the grounds where Lady Isora was sitting under the shade of her favorite tree. She looked up at the sound of his footsteps, and a deep crimson blush rose even to her brow. He saw it, and his heart beat more quickly, his pulse thrilled, every nerve quivered; he sat down by her side, and the silence that fell over them was more eloquent than words. She was the first to break it.

"I did not expect you to-day," she said, gently. "I thought you had joined the grand party at Huntly Manor."

"I find that I am compelled to live in London," he said, looking away from her, "and I came to-day to say good-by."

There was no sound; she made no answer; the hand that held the wild roses dropped them, and fell nerveless at her side.

"I may not have time to ride over again," he continued, "and I had a few leisure hours to-day."

Still no answer. Then he turned to look at her, and a cry of surprise escaped him. The beautiful face had grown white even to the lips—a dreadful pallor; the proud, frank eyes wore a startled look of horror; the sweet lips were quivering. He looked at her, powerless to speak.

"You are going," she said, faintly.

The tone of her voice, so full of pain, and her keen anguish went straight to his heart.

"I—I am obliged to go," he cried, with a burst of despair. "Lady Isora, I am the most unhappy man that ever lived."

She was silent for some minutes; then she said, gently:

"There are times when every one is unhappy, I believe. Brave people bear pain in silence; weak ones cry out."

She grasped the wild roses as she spoke, and turned to him with a smile on her face; but he who had seen that face, with its look of startled anguish, its deadly pallor, its utter despair, knew that the woman he loved so dearly loved him.

"Soldiers march up in the very face of the cannon at the word of command," he said. "Brave men lie down to die at the call of duty. I must not be less brave than these."

"Has duty called you?" she asked, gently, while the birds sang, and the flowers waved in the wind.

"Yes," he replied ; "not only duty, but honor."

"Then you must go," said Lady Isora. "Never mind what it costs you, or any one else—go."

The wind whispered round them, the sweet, fair flowers bent their heads as though in sheer pity.

"You shall say good-by to me here," she continued ; "and I shall always hope for and dream of your success."

"You are very good to me, Lady Isora," he replied, simply. "Good-by."

He held her hand one minute in his ; he controlled the passions that surged in his heart.

"May Heaven bless you," he continued, in a faltering voice. "I must not trust myself to say more."

"Good-by," she repeated.

The next moment he had gone, and she lay there, with her face buried in the sweet, crushed blossoms, weeping as women weep, for the love she had given, and given in vain.

CHAPTER XX.

A HUSBAND'S SECRET.

Two years passed, and the fame of Hubert Ruthven was firmly established ; men looked at him as the greatest power of the day. Lord Arncourt found all his hopes and wishes realized ; but one thing puzzled him, and that was his nephew's aversion to the mention of marriage.

Times had so far altered that it was now Lord Arncourt who stood in awe of his nephew. It was still in his power to disinherit him, but no man living could rob Hubert Ruthven of the fame and honor that were justly his.

The mention of marriage ceased at last. When the Duke of Ormescombe came to London with his family, the young member paid him a hurried call, pleaded excess of work, and left his grace wondering at his coolness and seeming estrangement.

He heard from time to time of Lady Isora's triumphs. Rumor gave her many suitors, and gossips wondered why she cared for none of them. Hubert Ruthven said to himself sadly that he could have told them the reason why. He never sought to meet her. Honor had spoken,

and he had obeyed more quickly than most men would have done.

He went at rare intervals to see his wife. He was kind, considerate, and thoughtful; but she, with the quick instinct that belongs to a loving, sensitive, poetical nature, divined his secret, and understood that his marriage with her had marred his life.

In time the certainty of that knowledge killed her. Other and less sensitive women would have made the best of such a life, would have enjoyed its luxuries, and have kept the dark shadow in the background. Not so with Alice Ruthven; she brooded over it in melancholy silence. All the glory of the Italian skies, the flush of color that lay over the land, the hue of the flowers, the song of the birds, the calm of the lakes, the grandeur of the mountains, failed to impress her. She wearied of them as she wearied of everything else, except her husband, and the fatal mistake she had led him into.

It preyed upon her mind, it saddened her spirits, it killed her as slow poison would have done. The gloomy, sullen thoughts never left her. The idea upon which she dwelt was that she was an unloved, neglected wife—that marrying her had been her husband's ruin.

She was so entirely alone that she had no opportunity of throwing off these thoughts. There was only her little child to whom she could speak, and every sight of that little fair face filled her with new sorrow.

The thought of a private marriage had not been dis-

pleasing to her ; she had said to herself that she did not care for trifles ; the only thing that she did care for was, that she should be Hubert Ruthven's wife.

But now she found these trifles hard to bear ; the world looked coldly upon her ; she was lonely, isolated, miserable. The husband she loved so dearly seemed as far from her as though she had never been married ; and the end of it all was, that she grieved over it until her grief killed her.

Hubert Ruthven was not present when his wife died. He knew that she was delicate and ailing, that she often mentioned the fact of her illness ; but he had been accustomed to that now for many months, and, after the fashion of men, thought but little of it.

The news of her death was a sudden and terrible blow ; none the less terrible that remorse was largely intermixed with it. He blamed himself most keenly for having neglected her, for having allowed long months to pass without seeing her.

It was too late now for remorse, for pity, or for love ; she whom it would have comforted was dead. He knew that before he could even reach the pretty villa by the lake-side, she would be buried. All that would remain to him of the beautiful girl he had seen under the apple-blossoms, the loving wife whose greatest fault had been her too great love for him, was the little child.

He was in the midst of business, but he went at once, and found his wife had been buried the day before his

and he had obeyed more quickly than most men would have done.

He went at rare intervals to see his wife. He was kind, considerate, and thoughtful; but she, with the quick instinct that belongs to a loving, sensitive, poetical nature, divined his secret, and understood that his marriage with her had marred his life.

In time the certainty of that knowledge killed her. Other and less sensitive women would have made the best of such a life, would have enjoyed its luxuries, and have kept the dark shadow in the background. Not so with Alice Ruthven; she brooded over it in melancholy silence. All the glory of the Italian skies, the flush of color that lay over the land, the hue of the flowers, the song of the birds, the calm of the lakes, the grandeur of the mountains, failed to impress her. She wearied of them as she wearied of everything else, except her husband, and the fatal mistake she had led him into.

It preyed upon her mind, it saddened her spirits, it killed her as slow poison would have done. The gloomy, sullen thoughts never left her. The idea upon which she dwelt was that she was an unloved, neglected wife—that marrying her had been her husband's ruin.

She was so entirely alone that she had no opportunity of throwing off these thoughts. There was only her little child to whom she could speak, and every sight of that little fair face filled her with new sorrow.

The thought of a private marriage had not been dis-

Lord Arncourt was delighted ; he had nothing left to wish for.

“We shall find the Arncourts take their proper place now,” he said ; “second to none.”

A year afterward, when a beautiful, dark-eyed baby was shown to him as Hubert's son, tears filled the old man's eyes, and he bent his head humbly.

“I have done but little,” he said, “that Heaven should so richly bless me.”

He died a few months afterward, and then Hubert Ruthven became Lord Clancey Arncourt. He was happy and prosperous ; his beautiful wife and lovely child were idolized by him. It was not often that the shadow of the memory of that first fair young wife came over him. He had done his best for the little Nina ; he had found her a comfortable home with Madame de St Lance ; he had arranged for her future ; and he imagined himself in some way entitled to forget the past. That had been a sad past for him.

He never told his wife one word of that first marriage ; he never alluded to it ; she remained always in most perfect ignorance of it. The happiness of her married life, he always liked to remember, was without a cloud.

So eight years passed away, bringing nothing but fame, honor, and happiness to the lord of Neversleigh. No other children came to gladden the hearts of Lord Arncourt and his wife ; but his son, the heir of that ancient title and vast

estate, grew in strength and beauty. They called him Darnley, after one of the heroes of their race.

Then, after eight years of unclouded happiness, such as rarely falls to the lot of mortal man, the blow fell which brought Hubert, Lord Arncourt, to the very depths of despair. In one short week he lost both wife and child. Darnley was seized with a violent attack of fever, and Lady Arncourt, who worshiped her only son, would insist upon attending him herself. She caught the fever from him, and, after a few days' illness, both died.

No words could paint the terrible effects of this blow on Lord Arncourt. It seemed to him that all hope, all life had ended ; that a funeral pall lay between him and the smiling heavens ; that desolation reigned supreme on earth.

On the day his wife died, people said that his hair grew gray, and the shadow of old age fell over him. He was never the same again. It might be said of him, as of many others, that the nobler and better part of him lay buried in his wife's grave.

CHAPTER XXI.

“WHAT IS THERE IN STORE FOR ME?”

A beautiful garden scene in the fair land of France, a bright, sunny day, the sky of that deep blue tint only seen in the land of poesy and song, floods of golden sunlight pouring down on the flowers, on myrtle and vine; birds of bright plumage singing the sweetest songs; a day when life seems one long luxury, and one long song. A pretty villa called the Chateau Beauseant, standing near the forest of St. Germain, in the midst of the beautiful country of the Seine et Oise.

The dark green trees of the forest formed a background, the clear deep stream of the Seine ran in front, a long white terrace over which the vines trailed in luxuriant abundance, led to a large garden, and the garden sloped to the banks of the beautiful river. It was an earthly paradise. There was every variety of color, every lovely line of sky, of tree, of flower; there was every beauty of nature; but the fairest part of the picture was the faces of the two young girls on the terrace, who stood watching the rapid disappearance of the small pleasure boats down the stream.

Two such faces as one only sees in pictures or in

dreams ; beautiful, rich in color, full of poetry, of passion, of genius ; alike in some respects, different in others ; remarkable in one thing, that both were young, but the face of one was as the face of an angel, full of goodness ; the face of the other was one that indicated strong feelings, and was not a face that took one's thoughts to heaven.

"I wish," said the young girl, whom every one called Reine, from her grand, queenly hauteur, and brilliant beauty, "I wish that I were in one of those boats."

"Perhaps you would not be much happier," replied a sweet voice. "Happiness lies *within*, not around us."

The dark eyes flashed unutterable scorn, the regal head was thrown back proudly, a light, mocking laugh came from lips beautiful enough to have wooed and won a world.

"That is like you, Belle ; you are a living volume of good sayings. If there is one thing in the world for which I thank Heaven more than another, it is that I am not so good as you."

"You have little to be thankful for in that case," was the quiet reply. "You waste your emotions, Reine ; you use so much over trifles."

Seemingly the subject already wearied beautiful Reine, for she sang the first few lines of one of Beranger's popular songs, and again Belle turned to her with a slightly shocked expression.

"Reine, you forget how much mamma dislikes that song."

Another little, mocking laugh, and the gay voice replied :

"What one does in mamma's presence and in her absence are two different things. I console myself for all misfortunes. If mamma forces me to assume a demureness in her presence that I do not feel, in her absence I shall sing the most republican of Beranger's songs. There must be *some* compensation for me."

Belle did not smile ; she was looking over the green trees of St. Germain, and the clear, deep river. A sigh of unutterable satisfaction came from her lips.

"How beautiful our home is, Re'ne. How dearly I love it."

"So is the outside of a prison beautiful, if it be built after grand Gothic style. Home and prison mean the same things to me."

"You talk so wildly. If ever you live to see the interior of a prison, you would realize the difference."

Reine only answered by a careless laugh, as she parted the trailing branches of the vine ; but the time was to come when both would remember the lightly-spoken words.

"*You* would be satisfied and contented anywhere," continued Reine. "Thank Heaven, I have a little more spirit than you. I am tired to death of Beauseant, and am wicked enough to own it. I am tired of what mamma calls the 'pleasures of domestic life.' Goodness fatigues

me, as I have no doubt it does many others, only they are not so frank as to say so."

Belle looked sadly at the lovely, laughing face.

"I know you do not mean what you say, Reine; you are not so careless as you try to make yourself."

"Indeed I am. I am quite as wicked as I pretend to be, and my wickedness consists in this—that I long for variety, for anything that could bring a stir or a change in this life of ours. I would rather dance at a fair, or row a boat, or do anything rather than remain here quiet much longer."

"But, Reine, you forget mamma. You surely love her?"

"Surely I do; but a girl cannot spend a whole life in loving her mother. Belle, do you never think of lovers and marriage—of a life different from this, as the sky at noontide differs from the sky at night?"

A slight flush, delicate as the faintest rose-bloom, passed over the fair young face.

"If I have foolish dreams, I must not tell them. I do not expect life to be always quiet and pleasant as it is now."

"You own that much. Look, Belle, is it possible, is there any hope of such a delightful reality? The postman is really coming here."

There was evidently no mistake. Five minutes more and the postman had opened the gates of the chateau. Reine went to meet him, and the old man bowed low

before that vision of queenly grace and beauty. There was one letter, and it came from England. Reine's face fell as she saw it.

"I *did* hope it was some kind of invitation to go somewhere, or to do something," she said, despairingly. "And it is only a letter from that most stupid of all countries, England."

"From England?" repeated Belle. "I did not know mamma had friends there."

"Nor did I. If the English people are like their climate, I wish mamma joy of her friends. Come with me, Belle, to take the letter."

The young girls walked slowly to the long, open window of a pretty saloon that looked over the flower-garden. A lady sat at the little table, writing busily, so busily that she did not even hear the sound of the light footsteps.

Years have changed Madame de St. Lance. Her face is still beautiful; but over her beauty there has fallen a careworn, haggard expression; there are silver threads in her luxuriant hair, and a troubled shadow in her eyes. The high-born, patrician face showed a mind ill at ease. There was a nervous movement in the white hand, a quivering of the lips, all showing that Madame de St. Lance had her own grief and sorrows to bear.

"Mamma," said Reine, "what could be the most welcome gift you could receive?"

A deep sigh came from her lips.

"I do not know, dear child, that earth holds a welcome gift for me," she said ; and the quiet melancholy in her voice brought a deeper shadow to the two fair faces.

"Here is a letter from England. I cannot hope it will be interesting to you, for I have never heard you speak of any friends in England."

Madame's face grew even paler ; her lips trembled, and the hand that eagerly grasped the letter shook so that she could hardly hold it. She did not offer to open the letter while the young girls remained with her, but the moment they had quitted the saloon she opened the envelope. Before reading it, she raised her eyes to heaven.

"What is there in store for me ?" she cried. "Oh, Heaven ! have I not suffered enough ?"

CHAPTER XXII.

"I DID IT FOR THE BEST."

Madame de St. Lance walked to the window. Near the great beds of crimson roses she saw the two girls, one with her vivid, glowing, earthly beauty, the other with the calm, sweet face that one sees in pictures of saints.

Long and most earnestly madame looked at them. They were both dear to her; one from the natural affection every mother feels for her child, the other from a long habit of love and care.

"They are lovely girls!" she murmured to herself; "more lovely than any I ever saw, either in the gay court of Paris or anywhere else. *He* ought to be pleased with her."

Then again madame fell into a long, deep reverie; her fine, aristocratic face grew paler, a troubled shadow lay in the depth of her eyes.

"If I could but be sure!" she said; "if I could but have one glimpse into the future!"

The wind stirred the vine-leaves, and scattered the crimson petals of the rose; some mysterious warning seemed to come to her in its music, for she grew paler as she listened to it. The white hand clenched the letter, as

though she must cling to something lest she should lose her strength ; her lips parted, and then closed firmly, as though she would fain have murmured a prayer, but found prayers unavailing. She made a strange picture as she stood there, framed by the vine-leaves, her face all pale and eloquent with emotion.

"It is too late to repent now," she said to herself ; "I did it for the best, and I failed."

Then a musical laugh from Reine caught her attention, and, with a sudden start, she remembered that the letter was still in her hands.

Slowly, and as one goes to perform a painful duty, madame went down the leaf-covered path.

"Reine ! Belle ! I want you ; I have something to say to you. Will you come with me ?"

They followed her to a pretty little summer-house that stood almost on the banks of the Seine, wondering why she wanted them, and what brought that solemn expression to her face.

Madame de St. Lance sat down on one of the pretty rustic chairs that were placed in the summer-house ; the young girls seated themselves at her feet. Again that sad, silent, half-frightened mood came over her ; her eyes seemed to linger on the blue waters of the Seine, as though she would fain ask from them what the future held.

"Mamma," said Reine, growing impatient at this strange silence, "I do not wish to be tiresome, but if you have anything to say, would you mind saying it ?"

Then madame aroused herself. She was too much accustomed to the girl's mode of speech to pay much heed to it. She laid her thin, white hand on the girl's shoulder.

"What I have got to say concerns us all, but you, Reine, more than any one else."

"I am very glad—nay, devoutly thankful—that something concerns me at last," said Reine; but the grave look on madame's face somewhat dismayed her. Madame continued:

"I have kept one secret from you, my dear children, for several reasons. One was that I believed it would add to the happiness of us all if that secret were kept; another was that I believed it would save one of you from the pain of unutterable longing for that which you might never attain."

The girls looked at her in wonder. She continued:

"The secret concerns you, Reine. I have brought you up like sisters, I have loved you both as my own children, yet I never had but one child. Reine, you are not *my* daughter. Listen, while I tell you your own story; it is not a common one."

Reine's beautiful face grew deadly pale.

"Not your child! Oh, mamma, I was not prepared for anything so cruel as that!"

"Do you love me so dearly, then, Reine?" asked madame, and her voice was sweet in its tenderness.

"Love you, mamma? Of course I love you—whom

else should I love? Not your child? Why it seems as though you had passed the sentence of death upon me."

Hot tears rose to her eyes, and her lips trembled.

"If I have done wrong in not telling you before," said madame, "I beg your pardon. I did it for the best. I could not foresee that events would happen as they have done. Reine, you are not my child except in affection; you are the daughter of Lord Arncourt, of Neversleigh, an English nobleman, who gave you into my charge when you were but five years old."

"Lord Arncourt!" repeated the girl, in her pretty French accent. "Oh, mamma! are you jesting with me, or is it really true?"

"True! Ah, Reine, you may see by the pain it gives me in telling, that it is really true. Listen, my dear child. Your father, when quite young, contracted a very unequal marriage, a marriage that he was obliged to conceal, and you, his only child, at your mother's death, were brought to me. You know best how I loved you."

"But why—why was my father's marriage unequal? How do you mean?" asked Reine, her head thrown proudly back, her face all aglow with indignation. "Unequal in what respect?"

"Unequal in rank. Your mother, as I understood the story, though beautiful, refined, and gentle, was not an aristocrat—was not even what the world calls a lady. She was a schoolmaster's daughter."

"She was a lady, or he would never have married her,"

said Reine, quickly, while Belle looked on with wondering eyes.

Madame laid her hand on the girl's flushed cheek.

"My dear Reine," she said, "be patient. I am only repeating to you what was told to me by your father himself. Listen, and I will tell you the story as it was told to me."

So, while the wind swept the crimson leaves from the roses and played with the vine, while the flowers bloomed and the birds sang, Madame de St. Lance repeated the story of that pitiful love and pitiful marriage.

"Did my father love my mother, or did he not?" asked the girl, imperiously. "I wish to know."

"My dearest Reine, how can I tell you?" and madame's face grew paler.

"I am quite sure," interrupted the girl, "that she was a lady; I feel as though my mother must have been a lady. Why, mamma, what have you told me so often yourself? Look at my hands; they are small, and white, and slender—you always said that was the mark of good race."

"You came of good race, Reine, on your father's side," said madame; then Belle, with her gentle voice, joined in:

"Reine, let mamma finish her story, darling; be patient."

The angry glow died from the beautiful face, and madame finished what she had to say.

"My father was wrong," cried the girl; "he had no right to keep his marriage a secret!"

"You must not sit in judgment on your own father, Reine," said madame, severely.

"I must say what I think," was the impatient retort. "Why, Belle, you are crying; those are tears falling on my hands. What is it?"

"I cannot bear to think that you are not my sister, after all. Oh, mamma, why need you have told us?"

Madame started, as one suddenly recalled to a disagreeable memory.

"You have more to hear yet, my dear children. This letter that I hold in my hand is from Lord Arncourt. He—now, Reine, you must be patient—he, soon after your mother's death, married again—married a lady in his own rank of life, the daughter of some great and powerful nobleman. She had one son, who would have been your father's heir, but mother and son both died together, and their loss almost maddened him. For some months—so he writes—he has been incapable of thought or action; but now, remembering his other child, the daughter of the fair young wife he lost so long ago, he writes to claim you, and ask for you back."

Reine sprang from her seat in uncontrollable excitement. Belle uttered a little cry of dismay. Madame continued:

"Lord Arncourt is all that is kind and considerate; he says that as you are a stranger, and will necessarily feel

the parting with us very keenly, he hopes that we will go to England with you. He kindly asks me to live at Neversleigh as your chaperon; and remembering that I had a daughter, prays me to bring Belle as a companion to you, so that you see we shall not be parted."

Belle clasped her white arms round Reine's neck.

"I shall not lose you," she cried, "after all!"

"So I am Lord Arncourt's daughter," said Reine, musingly.

"I have called you Reine," said madame, "because at first even you struck me as being a little queen, just as we called you Belle because you were even so beautiful when you were a child."

Reine's dark eyes were all aglow.

"Then I have another name," she said; "some quaint, half-barbarous English name, without doubt."

"I do not think it barbarous; it is Nina—Nina Ruthven your father called you when you came here."

"Oh, mamma," said Reine, "only an hour since I asserted all the English were stupid, and now I am English myself; that is what Belle would call a just retribution."

There was so much to tell, and so much to talk of, that hours passed like minutes. Reine was almost too excited for speech. Madame's face wore the pale and sorrowful look of Madonna. Belle wept without restraint; but Reine made picture after picture of the golden future that lay before her.

"Mamma," she cried, suddenly—"ah, me, I shall never call you anything but mamma—tell me shall I be Lord Arncourt's heiress?"

"No; the estates are entailed. I know the heir is a gentleman called Eric Chilvers; he will succeed to the title and estates, unless your father should marry again."

"Still, as his daughter, I must be heiress to something," said Reine; "he must be rich."

"He is rich," replied madame, quietly; "but it would not be possible for me even to guess what portion of his riches would come to you."

And then the summons to dinner came, but Reine was far too excited by what she had heard to eat.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"I HAVE GRIEVOUSLY SINNED."

Lord Arncourt sat alone in his library. Years had passed since he—the brilliant orator, the learned statesman, the gifted leader of a great party—succeeded to the title of Lord Arncourt. Years that had stolen the brightness from his face, that had shadowed his eyes, that had left deep lines round the firm lips. Hard work, great anxiety, great responsibilities, had left their trace upon the handsome face, but neither time nor work had aged him as sorrow had done.

It would be idle to attempt to describe his grief—it was beyond all comfort, it was beyond all words. The brighter, better part of his life had died with his wife. She had been the life of his life, the soul of his soul; she had been to him what the sun is to the earth, the source of all his brightness, the warmth, the light, the center of his heart and life. When she died, it seemed to him that the world ended. He would fain have retired from public life, but that he found it impossible—there was no one to take his place—and the utmost he could do for himself was to secure a few month's quiet.

He spent it in thought. There were times when the wind

moaning fitfully through the trees, and the mists of evening falling, seemed to sadden the whole earth ; times when he wondered if this sudden death of his beloved wife was a punishment for his neglect of Alice. The idea gradually took possession of him, and he pondered over it till it became a kind of mania.

“How differently I would spend my life,” he said, “if I could live it over again !”—that unavailing cry which has gone up from the depths of so many tortured souls. For the first time it struck him that perhaps he had done grievous wrong to Nina. Granted that her mother was not a lady, that for long years that marriage had made him wretched, had hampered, spoiled, and blighted his life, that he had been obliged to keep it secret from every one, that it had caused him more unhappiness than words can tell—for all that, Nina was his own child, and, perhaps, after all, he was guilty before Heaven. He had tried to place his own responsibility on other shoulders, and he had succeeded. His daughter had grown from infancy to womanhood, and he had never even seen her. She was his own child—did it lie in his power to do away with all responsibility over her ?

His son, the very pride of his life, had been taken from him. There was no one left now but a stranger to succeed him, and this daughter, whom, in his busy, prosperous career, he had almost forgotten.

True, Eric Chilvers must succeed him ; but he had ample fortune with which to endow his daughter, should

he make up his mind to send for her. He would not decide hastily. He wrote for the Duke of Ormescombe and for Eric. For the first time he revealed the story of his marriage—a story no one could refuse to believe. For the first time the duke understood why Hubert Ruthven had lived so long alone.

“Isora never knew this story?” he asked.

“No,” replied Lord Arncourt; “I did not tell her of my marriage. I never loved any woman but her, and I could not bear to speak to her of another.”

Then he asked their advice as to what he should do.

“Send for her by all means,” said the duke. “You ought never to have parted with her. Send for her, and do your best to atone for past negligence.”

“I have grievously sinned,” replied Lord Arncourt, with a melancholy smile; “but, as far as I can atone, I will.”

He told them the whole story of his marriage, and of how, at his wife's death, he had taken the little Nina to Madame de St. Lance.

“And you have never seen her since?” asked Eric Chilvers.

“No—I must confess it with shame—never since.”

“You do not even know what she is like?” said the duke.

“No,” he said again; “I have not the least idea. She was a pretty child, loving and gentle; but I saw so little of her.”

"It seems strange," said his grace, "that this child, whom you, as it were, gave away, should be the only one left to you. Send for her at once, Hubert; lose no time. And were I in your place, I should send for the lady with whom she has been living—for her and her daughter, too. Society will be useful for you, and keep you from growing too melancholy."

Lord Arncourt had scarcely heard the last few words. His eyes were fixed on Eric's face. A sudden idea had occurred to him—Eric was young, handsome, and gifted. What if his daughter married his heir? The relationship between them was so very distant that it could not matter. The idea delighted him; his daughter, after all, would be mistress of Neversleigh—would be Lady Arncourt. It seems almost the same thing as though she were his heiress, after all. Perhaps grandchildren of his own might succeed him, and he had not liked the idea of leaving all he had to strangers, even though those strangers were of his own kith and kin. He found himself murmuring the name, "Nina Lady Arncourt," and the two strangers who were with him wondered why his face brightened so suddenly.

"I will send at once," he said. "And, Eric, you need not hurry back to London. Stay with me a few weeks; help me to entertain my guests. I shall not feel at home among the young and gay."

Mr. Chilvers readily consented. He felt some curiosity as to this young daughter of Lord Arncourt, and was

pleased to have the opportunity of seeing her. So it was decided, and that day Lord Arncourt wrote to Madame de St. Lance, inclosing a check for a sum that startled her. He begged her to use as much expedition as possible, for he was anxious to see his child. Madame wrote to him by return of post, and promised to be at Never-sleigh by the end of the week.

Then Lord Arncourt called his housekeeper, and bade her make all needful arrangements for the reception of three ladies.

The news soon spread in the household.

"My lord had been married before—a marriage he had been obliged to keep secret from the old lord—and his daughter was coming home."

"Thank goodness, we shall have ladies to the house soon!" was the general exclamation; and the servants were so pleased at the idea that they soon ceased to wonder over the marriage.

The day and the hour had arrived at length when they were expected, and Lord Arncourt sat in the library alone. He had tried to keep up appearances, he had tried to look unconcerned and to speak coolly; but the very depths of his soul were stirred within him. The present seemed to disappear, and the past lived in his memory as vividly as though it were but yesterday. He saw the blue sky, the bright sunshine, the pink and white apple-blossoms with the lovely face beneath, the face that always brightened and softened for him; he heard again the

sound of that voice, so long silent; he remembered the timid, shy, caressing manner, and this was Alice's daughter coming home to him—Alice who had loved him so tenderly, and had died away from him.

Would she have Alice's face, Alice's tender eyes? Would she speak with that low, sweet voice that he had once thought more musical than the cooing of the ring-dove?

"Oh, Alice," he cried, "have you pardoned me yet for all the neglect and loneliness that helped to shorten your life? I will atone for it to your child."

At that moment Eric entered.

"Lord Arncourt, the carriage has arrived. You are sure to feel agitated; shall I bring the ladies here?"

A few minutes after the door opened, and three ladies entered, escorted by Eric Chilvers. Lord Arncourt rose from his seat; he was breathless, and trembled with agitation. He tried to speak, but all words failed him. Madame de St. Lance saw it; she went up to him with outstretched hands.

He murmured a few words; then she took the hand of a tall, beautiful girl, who had the face of a goddess and the figure of a queen.

"My lord," she said, "this is the child you intrusted to me, your daughter Nina, whom we have called Reine."

Lord Arncourt clasped the girl in his arms.

"My first words to you must be a prayer for pardon," he said. "For your mother's sake, forgive me."

While he was thus speaking Eric Chilvers stood, his eyes fixed on the lovely face of the girl whom madame introduced as "Belle."

CHAPTER XXIV.

"SHE WOULD MAKE A GRAND LADY ARNCOURT."

"Of all the new arrivals," said Eric Chilvers to Lord Arncourt, "madame puzzles me the most."

The two gentlemen were walking on the terrace smoking a cigar. The ladies had retired, as was natural, perhaps, under the circumstances. The gentlemen were busily engaged in discussing them. The moon was shining full and bright through the trees, and the night wind was calm and still.

Lord Arncourt smiled as he replied :

"Madame puzzles you ? Why, Eric, to me she seems very easy to understand—a lady of high birth and great wealth, who has lost everything in the world she ever called her own."

"She has not lost her daughter," said Eric, quickly, "and I venture to think mademoiselle is a great treasure."

Lord Arncourt looked troubled for one half minute, then he answered quickly :

"You are right. Belle is a beautiful, charming, gentle girl. There is something very striking in the repose of her manner and the grace of her words. But you have not answered my question, Eric—why does madame puzzle you ?"

"I cannot explain. There seems to me something so melancholy, so silent, so reserved about her—an atmosphere of mystery that I cannot penetrate."

"You must have been reading some of Wilkie Collins' fictions, Eric," laughed Lord Arncourt. "There is no secret about madame, except that I think she has too vivid a recollection of her early troubles."

"It may be that. She is very elegant, high-bred, graceful, courteous in her manner; but she gives me the impression of a person who is always brooding over one idea. If I speak to her suddenly, she looks up with a startled air of one whose thoughts are miles away, whose mind is engrossed, whose heart is burdened. I cannot account for the impression, but there it is."

Lord Arncourt laughed again.

"It would not really be wise to destroy your delightful theory of romance, Eric, but I do not think madame has any mystery. Her thoughts are more in the past than in the present."

"How long will she remain here?" asked Eric. And a keen observer would have noticed how his voice trembled as he asked the question.

"I cannot tell. Long as I can persuade her to remain, you may be sure. In all probability till Reine is married."

Then Lord Arncourt's voice faltered slightly, and he listened intently for the next word.

Eric smiled.

"I do not think Reine will soon marry," he said. "I shall be surprised if she does."

"Why?" asked Lord Arncourt, and he asked the question in some little agitation.

"Because she is difficult to please. Those brilliant, beautiful girls generally are."

"Do you think her so beautiful, Eric?" asked Lord Arncourt.

"I think her the brightest and loveliest girl I have seen," was the quiet reply.

"Some people would prefer Belle's style of beauty," said his lordship:

"There is no comparison," answered Eric. "They are both dark; but Reine's beauty is glowing, full of color, bright as the noonday sun. Belle's quiet, soft, subdued, like moonlight over a deep, tranquil lake."

"And which style do you prefer?" asked his lordship.

"It would be invidious to choose. I am glad that the golden apple was never given to me as to Paris. I could not possibly have chosen between those two superb goddesses. I should have divided the fruit."

"That would not have done, Eric. Do you think Reine resembles me at all?"

"No. I have never spoken to you of her mother, Lord Arncourt. Was she dark or fair?"

"Fair as a lily. It has often been a matter of surprise to me that her daughter did not resemble her. My poor

Alice was an English beauty—fair, gentle, with blue eyes, and bright, fair hair."

"Mademoiselle Reine has spirit enough for all the Arncourts," said Eric. "How bright, and defiant, and full of animation she is!"

"The child has plenty of life," was the pleased reply. "Are you good friends with her?"

"Yes, I think so; although we spend the greater part of our time in disputing."

Lord Arncourt longed to ask more, but he did not like. There was great dignity about Mr. Chilvers that did not permit of any liberty being taken with him. He would fain have said something of the plan that engrossed him—his marriage with Reine. He had set his whole heart upon that; he had wished for it when he saw his daughter—before he knew even what she was like; but now that her brilliant beauty had filled him with wonder and admiration, he was more anxious than ever.

"She would make a grand Lady Arncourt," he said to himself; "she would be more admired than any woman I know."

But not to Eric Chilvers, his heir and distant kinsman, did he say one word. He had resolved, too, that perhaps it would be better not to say one word to his daughter.

"It will be better," he thought, "to leave them quite alone. He must love Reine—nobody could help it; interference might only spoil all."

He had watched them, and saw with delight that they spent a great deal of time together. Reine, in her fearless fashion, was learning to ride, and she would only take lessons from him. She delighted in teasing him ; she found out all his peculiarities, and delighted in trying how much she could tease without angering him.

Lord Arncourt would listen with delight ; her wit and half-veiled satire amused him ; her high spirits, her keen enjoyment of life, her great animation and vivacity, charmed him ; but of his heart's desire Lord Arncourt, like a wise man, said nothing.

The young girls had at first been bewildered by the change ; the magnificence of Neversleigh startled them—they had seen nothing like it. English manners and customs pleased them ; the country—the beautiful woodland scenery, the grand old trees—charmed them.

"I never thought England was so beautiful," said Belle one day to Lord Arncourt. "I am amused now when I think how I used to picture it."

"How was that?" he asked.

"As always dark, damp, and dreary, with mist and fog. I did not think the sun ever shone warm and bright ; but now I like it even better than France. I like the variation of the climate, and I think that I shall find something beautiful even in a fog."

"You must see a London fog, Belle. Here we have only a thin, silvery mist that rises like a curtain, showing

the fair world beneath ; there it is thick and yellow, dense and damp—it seems to cling to you ; yet I have seen beautiful colors in a London fog.”

“French people, as a rule, have not a correct idea of England,” said Belle. “Reine used to dislike it very much.”

“That is strange,” said Lord Arncourt. “She should have loved it instinctively, because it was her own.”

“I think,” said Belle, quietly, “there is more nonsense talked about instinct than about anything else in the world. It seems to me that what people call instinct is just as often wrong as right.”

The girls had been delighted, too, with Lord Arncourt.

“How handsome your father is,” said Belle to Reine. “What a noble face—what a grand, chivalrous manner. I do not envy you your wealth, Reine, nor your brilliant future, nor any of the great gifts and blessings that are yours, but I do envy you the love and care of your father.”

“My *dear* Belle !” was the reply, in a tone of ineffable wonder.

Belle looked up in surprise.

“All moral sentiments are very beautiful,” laughed Reine ; “but I should never think of envying you the love and care of your mother. Give me solid, tangible blessings. Love is very well. A nice ‘papa,’ as English girls say, is very delightful ; but, for my part, I would freely give you half the love.”

"I do love Lord Arncourt," said Belle, musingly ; "if he were my father I should worship him."

"Worship away, my dear friend—I shall not be jealous. You must not take any of my promised fortune away from me ; but to the love, as I said before, you are most unfeignedly welcome."

They spoke freely enough of Neversleigh, of Lord Arncourt, of everything they saw. Of every person who came to the place they expressed their ideas and thoughts with great freedom ; but, strange to say, they never discussed Eric Chilvers.

Once only Belle, who did not understand the matter so clearly as Reine, asked :

"Is Mr. Chilvers related to Lord Arncourt, Reine?"

"Very distantly," she replied.

And then Belle continued :

"He is my ideal Englishman ; whenever I think of the word 'Saxon,' I shall think of him. I am sure he is of Saxon descent."

There was a quiet gleam of amusement in Reine's eyes as she listened.

"He prides himself, Belle, upon that," she said. "If there is any particular virtue in being an Anglo-Saxon, Mr. Chilvers possesses it."

"He has such a frank face, and that fair, clustering hair of his is like the pictures of the Saxons ; I recognized the type of face the moment I saw him."

“He ought to feel flattered,” said Reine; “but men are proverbially ungrateful.”

The words were few, but something in the tone of the voice struck Belle. She did not resume the subject, although Reine often tried her.

CHAPTER XXV.

"I LIKE WORDS THAT ARE TO THE POINT."

Great preparations had been made at Neversleigh for the reception of the ladies. By Lord Arncourt's direction, a suite of rooms was arranged expressly for Reine. As his daughter he considered she ought to be differently treated to the others, that more respect should be paid to her.

"I must make some distinction," he said to himself; and for Reine's especial ease every luxury was provided. Her rooms were on the same floor as those arranged for Madame de St. Lance and her daughter; but while Reine's room opened on to a balcony full of blooming flowers, those occupied by madame led by an iron staircase to the terrace below. The young girls were delighted with their apartments. Reine stood at the door of her magnificent chamber.

"This is just what I have longed for all my life," she said, "and I consider myself very fortunate that my longings are gratified at last."

It was some few days before they were quite at home; there was so much to be arranged for them. A pretty Parisienne was found for Reine, and established as her maid. Madame preferred an English one. Lord Arncourt

would have them learn to ride, and suitable horses must be found for them. Reine's eyes gleamed with delight as she saw the beautiful habit of blue cloth, the hats, the gloves, the riding-whip—everything was as perfect as it could be.

"I think some good fairy must have presided at my birth," she said ; but Belle, remembering the lonely life of her mother, sighed deeply.

After they had been some days at Neversleigh, Lord Arncourt made all his arrangements. He asked madame if she would honor him by remaining at the hall until his daughter married. He urged her to do so. "Reine was so beautiful," he said, "and so young, he did not like to take charge of her."

He offered her what in the poor lady's eyes seemed a grand income.

"For your daughter," he said, "who has been like a sister to mine, I must beg you to allow me to treat her as though she were my own. Let her share every advantage with Reine. You will do me a real kindness if you consent to this."

It was not possible to refuse. Madame looked slightly troubled as she said "Yes."

Then Lord Arncourt called Reine into his study. He had not talked much to her ; he felt rather shy and ill at ease before this beautiful, brilliant girl whom he had so long neglected.

She looked at him with such proud, bright eyes. She

seemed at times to be considering him, and he was not comfortable under the inspection. Now, almost for the first time, he sent for her to his study to talk to her alone. He placed a chair for her, and sat down by her side, wondering again, as he looked at her, why she had none of her mother's fair beauty in her face. She always reminded him of a diamond—she was so cold, so hard, so brilliant.

"Reine," he said, with a smile, "do you know anything of the value of money?"

"I know the want of it, papa," she said, abruptly.

"I am sorry to hear it ; but have you any notion of its value? Do you know how to spend it, how far it goes, what it will buy, or anything of that kind?"

"I have had but little experience," she replied. "I am quick, though, and can soon learn."

"Because I wish to do what I suppose every gentleman does, and every young lady expects—make you an allowance of money to spend."

"It will be welcome," said Reine. "I never had much."

"Remember, I place no restriction upon you ; spend what you like, and as you like—of course, without waste or extravagance. I only want you to be happy. I want to atone to you as far as I can for all the long years during which I neglected you."

"I should have been very happy here," answered Reine, looking grave ; "and then it was my rightful place, you know."

"You were happy with Madame de St. Lance, were you not?" he inquired, anxiously.

"After a very quiet fashion. I am not complaining. Madame was always very good to me. I cannot help wishing that she had told me the truth about myself and my true parentage."

"You would not have been happier," he said; "your life would have been one continual longing."

"It was worse than that," she replied; "but we need not discuss it. You wished to make some arrangement with me, papa."

There was at times a certain lofty imperiousness about her that made Lord Arncourt feel ill at ease in her presence. He felt that she had a will strong as his own—stronger, perhaps. He had a vague idea that there was in her a depth of satire and scorn with which he could not cope.

"I should like," he said, "to give you so much per annum for your personal expenses—for your dress, jewels, ornaments, or anything of that kind. You may send for what you will, and send in your bills to me. I wish you to have everything of the very best. You must dress according to your position. Madame de St. Lance will advise you."

"Her ideas would be too old-fashioned to suit me," interrupted Reine, and Lord Arncourt looked up in surprise.

Reine continued :

"She knew all that was requisite twenty years ago, I have no doubt; but I should be sorry to accept her laws on dress now."

"Reine, my dear," said Lord Arncourt, "you have a very trenchant method of expressing yourself."

"Have I? I like words that are to the point. What are you going to do with Belle, papa?"

Then Lord Arncourt told her. He had some notion, when she came in, of treating her like a child—of advising her; he found himself deferring to her, and consulting her as though she were a woman.

"So Belle is to remain here," she said. "I am very glad. I am so used to having her about me, that I should not like to miss her."

Not a very sentimental way of looking at it; but that was characteristic of Reine.

Then Lord Arncourt and his daughter sat for some little time in silence. She was carelessly turning the leaves of a scrap-book which lay on the table.

"Was that all you wanted me for, papa?" she said, at length.

"Yes, Reine; but tell me, are you happy at Never-sleigh? Is there anything more that I can do for your comfort?"

"If I should think of anything, papa, I will tell you. I am very happy. If I want anything, I shall not be afraid of asking for it."

"Reine," said Lord Arncourt, suddenly, as she turned to leave the room, "do you like Eric Chilvers?"

She turned aside quickly, but not before he had seen the vivid flush on her face. It pleased him.

"I like him very well," she replied. "He is very agreeable, except when he argues with me."

"I am pleased," said Lord Arncourt. "He will probably spend a great deal of time here, and I should not feel comfortable if you did not like him."

She was opening the door when Lord Arncourt suddenly bethought himself.

"Reine," he said, "have you not one kiss to give me?"

She went back and raised her beautiful face to his, and touched him with her soft lips.

"I must kiss you, and thank you," she said, carelessly. "You must not frown at the first milliner's bill you see of mine."

"I promise that," he replied. "Reine, whatever you order for yourself, order likewise for Belle."

She took a careful, business-like view of the situation.

"I will do so, with pleasure, if you wish, papa; but what is quite suitable for me would hardly be suitable for Belle."

"I wish it to be so," said Lord Arncourt.

"Then I will see that your wishes are carried out," she said, with a bright, careless smile. "I am going for my riding lesson. *Au revoir*, papa."

She went away, leaving him full of wonder. Where had she taken that cold, hard, bright nature from?

"She is not in the least like poor Alice," he said to himself. "Alice had the most gentle and tender heart in all the world. Reine has not inherited one particle of it. I am not so cold and hard as she is."

Then he went to the window to watch her mount the spirited, mettlesome horse that she had insisted upon having in place of a quieter one. His beautiful daughter puzzled him.

"What would my beloved wife have thought of her?"

And then, although he felt that he had done wrong, it was some kind of relief to him that Lady Isora and Reine had never met.

He watched her as she mounted; he admired the wild, free grace of every movement, the dignified, yet half-careless ease, the perfect harmony.

"She does things," he said to himself, "that no one else would do; yet everything she does seems right and suitable to her."

He watched intently to see if Eric Chilvers paid her any lover-like attentions. They laughed and talked, but for once in his life Lord Arncourt was puzzled. He could not see any signs of love, yet they seemed something more than friends.

As he stood there, a gentle, half-timid knock came to the door.

"Come in," said Lord Arncourt ; and then he looked in surprise.

There, blushing and beautiful, stood Belle.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"HAS SHE A HEART?"

She went up to him, her sweet face crimson with blushes, her dark eyes bright with tears. She held out her little white hand, and her lips trembled as she spoke.

"Lord Arncourt," she said, "pray forgive me, if I am intruding on you. I could not help coming to thank you. Mamma has told me how good and kind you are to me, and I am so grateful to you."

He took the little white hands held out to him, and as he held them in his grasp, a strange thrill went over him.

"My dear child," he said, "you need not thank me. I am only too glad to be kind, as you call it, to Reine's friend. You have been like a sister to her all your life, Reine tells me."

"I love her very dearly, Lord Arncourt. You are so generous, so good, that you make me presumptuous. I am going to ask a favor."

"I am sure it will be granted," he said, with a kindly smile. "What is it?"

The crimson deepened on her face.

"Pray do not think me presumptuous," she said, "but you tell me so often you like me for Reine's sake, because I have been Reine's sister ; will you like me for my own—just a little?"

He felt the small hands tremble in his own.

"My dearest child," he said, inexpressibly touched, "I do like you very much 'for your own sake,' as you call it, and I hope you will always be Reine's sister."

"You have been so good, so kind to me," she said. "The tears stood in mamma's eyes when she told me of all your generosity to us. How am I to thank you?"

"By being a true friend to my daughter. She is beautiful, brilliant, and high-spirited, but she lacks your quietness ; she wants more stability, calmer, clearer judgment. I feel that the time will come for her when she will need a friend ; will you be that friend?"

She raised her eyes to his face, and there was in them a depth of purpose, a steadiness, a reliance, that struck him forcibly.

"I promise you," she said, "I will."

And the time came when both remembered the words, and she kept her faith.

"I must not intrude on you," continued the young girl, in her clear voice ; "but I could not help coming. My heart was quite full of gratitude ; some of it must be told in words."

Long after she had left him he sat thinking of her.

"It seems ungrateful to say so," he thought, "but I

cannot help wishing Reine were more like her. < She is so gentle, so sweet, so considerate ; she is tender of heart, pure of soul ; she is one of those women who are born to console and to comfort, to elevate and refine. > Happy the man who has such a daughter ! happy the man who has such a wife ! I wish that Reine were more like her. Has she any heart, that beautiful daughter of mine ? ”

He put her to the test the following day. He asked her to take a ride with him.

“ I will go,” she replied, with a smile, “ if you will let me gallop as quickly as I like.”

“ That you *shall* do,” he said.

Soon afterward they rode away together, Reine, in her heart, half-vexed at being deprived of Eric's society.

“ I am going to take you, Reine, to a place that should be a shrine for you,” said Lord Arncourt, as they rode through the beautiful Neversleigh Wood.

“ I should be a sorry pilgrim, papa ; or, if I were one at all, the peas in my shoes must be well boiled.”

She laughed carelessly. Both words and laugh jarred upon Lord Arncourt's sensitive nerves.

“ It should be a shrine to you, Reine,” he said, “ if not to any one else in the world. It is your mother's old home—the place where I saw her first.”

A petulant, impatient expression came over the beautiful face.

“ Now I shall have to do so much sentiment,” she

thought; "and I cannot, I am sure. It is not in my line."

"Has she a heart?" He asked himself the question over and over again, as they stood before the pretty school-house and garden.

Lord Arncourt had dismounted, and, with the permission of the residents, had taken his daughter through the house into the garden. The apple-tree was still standing, though in place of the pink and white blossoms hung beautiful ripe fruit.

He pointed to it.

"You see that, Reine. Underneath it I saw your mother first, with the sunshine on her hair."

Reine looked carelessly.

"It is very interesting," she said, not really knowing what to say; desirous of pleasing him, yet with a horror of all sentiment.

"Child," he said, hastily, "it is of your mother you speak; 'interesting' is hardly the word."

But she had already turned away; she was looking at the little house.

"Did my mother really live *here*?" she asked, and he detected something like contempt in her tone.

"Yes, she lived here, fair as the blooming flowers, pure as the lilies—sweet, ah! sweeter than words of mine can tell."

"Her sweetness did not hold you captive, papa," she replied, curtly. "It is a very small place; she could not

have been very happy here. I shall find it difficult to make a shrine of a school-house."

He bit his lips, and inwardly vowed never again while he lived to talk sentimentality to his daughter. He repressed his impatience, saying that if she had been trained in a home of her own it would have been different.

"You never ask me about your mother, Reine. Have you no curiosity about her?"

"No, papa. I do not remember her; besides, it always seems to me a painful story. The sooner it is forgotten the better."

Had she any heart? He repressed his impatience still. He showed her her mother's favorite trees and flowers.

"Would you like to gather some of those roses?" he asked. "I helped your mother to plant them."

She sat down and plucked one—a dark, glowing rose, fragrant and sweet. She fastened it carelessly in the bodice of her habit—so carelessly that when she remounted her horse he saw that it had fallen, and she did not even remember it. They sat down for a few minutes on a rustic wooden bench that stood outside the porch, Lord Arncourt recalling, with sorrow of heart, the hours he had spent in that sunny, bright garden.

"Reine," he said, suddenly, "you are not in disposition at all like your mother. Could you ever love any one very much?"

"I do not know, papa. I do not love many people.

I only care for a few. In the way you mean, love would be a fire with me—not a sentiment.”

How vividly the words came back to him afterward, when her love had indeed proved a devastating fire.

She seemed to forget his question, and looked up at the humble little house.

“Papa,” she asked, abruptly, “was my mother a lady?”

“What do you mean, Reine?”

“Was she well-bred and elegant like madame? I know she was not rich ; but was she educated and refined?”

“I loved her,” he replied, briefly. “That must answer all.”

Then Reine arose, and gathered the fold of her habit around her.

“Shall we go now, papa? The horses will be tired. I am afraid you do not find me a congenial companion for a sentimental expedition.”

Lord Arncourt made no reply ; he opened the gate for her. She passed, and without one glance, one lingering look, went on with a brightening face.

“Has she a heart?” Once more the question was asked.

The answer was : “No.”

She had fire, animation, genius of a kind ; but a heart—no. And her father would not own, even to himself, how great was his disappointment.

While Reine, as she rode by him, resolved that she would not ride out with Lord Arncourt again.

"Belle would just suit him," she said ; "she has all those sentimental ideas. As a companion, I most decidedly prefer Eric Chilvers."

The next time Lord Arncourt asked her to ride with him she excused herself, and it was well that he did not know the reason why.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"WHY SHOULD I NEVER TOUCH ANY HEART?"

From that hour Lord Arncourt seemed to take another view of his daughter's character. He never again appealed to her affection. She had no heart; the tenderness and sweetness that form part of woman's character seemed foreign to her, but he was proud of her. Her great beauty pleased him; he liked to hear her admired. His vanity and his ambition alike were gratified by the homage paid to her. She was brilliant and gifted. He enjoyed listening to her conversation. Her satire was polished, keen, and occasionally bitter. She had the talent of painting a character in an epigram; a few words from her would say as much as a volume from another.

"You are more French than English in character," her father said to her one day. "I could imagine when you are speaking that I was listening to one of the grand French women of the olden empire, who ruled half the world with satire, and the other half with smiles."

Reine laughed.

"I am quite English in one respect," she said; "and that is, my keen appreciation of the comforts of life."

Lord Arncourt owned to himself that he had done a wise deed in sending for his daughter. His house was no longer the same ; it was presided over by a high-bred and elegant woman, who was fond of society, who had a talent for it ; who delighted in seeing the grand old mansion filled with visitors ; who was never so well pleased as when she was arranging for some great entertainment. Madame was essentially a woman of the world.

The two young girls seemed to have brought with them an atmosphere of youth and gayety. The sight of fair faces, the sound of fresh, sweet voices, were pleasant after the deep gloom that had so long overshadowed Never-sleigh.

Then Lord Arncourt seemed as though he could not do enough to indulge his beautiful daughter. No day passed without some amusement. He gave grand dinner parties, to which the *elite* of the country were invited ; he gave grand balls, where all youth and beauty congregated. Fetes, archery meetings, croquet parties, were held in the grounds ; riding parties were formed to visit the ruins of the neighborhood ; picnics were arranged, where the young people might enjoy themselves at their ease. Then he was continually surprising Belle and Reine by the magnificence of his presents. Everything that young girl's heart could desire was theirs in abundance.

Madame was very anxious that they should go to Lon-

don for the season, and be presented. She constantly urged this upon Lord Arncourt ; he always put it off.

"I have only just recovered my daughter," he said. "Let me keep her with me at least for a time. If I let her go to London, I am sure to lose her."

His real motive was the strong desire he had to see Eric and Reine lovers. He thought that if they remained together, they must most assuredly fall in love with each other. If Reine went to London she would soon have a hundred lovers at her feet. He would rather she married Eric than a royal duke even. No doubt that when she once made her *debut* in the great world she would have lovers higher in rank and position than Eric Chilvers ; but her marriage with him would please her father best. He did not want her to be thrown much into the society of eligible men until she was betrothed to Eric.

Many people understood it. Madame, usually so quick at penetration, was the last to perceive it.

"Lord Arncourt would like his daughter to marry his heir," was a frequent remark. Mothers warned their sons it was useless to fall in love there. Men told each other Lord Arncourt had other views for his daughter. Many asked themselves—would my lord's wish be accomplished? It was impossible to tell. Eric Chilvers seemed to have a very kindly liking for his beautiful kinswoman. He laughed with her, talked to her, enjoyed her satire, admired her constant animation, for it was impossible to feel dull where Reine was ; but it was uncertain whether he

loved her. Many thought that he preferred the pure and gentle girl whose face was like a sunbeam, whose voice was music. He talked less to her, but there was quite another expression on Eric's face when he addressed Belle—one of reverence and deepest respect; there was less familiarity, less laughter. With Reine he enjoyed a jest; with Belle he enjoyed a noble sentiment. He turned to the one for sympathy in all his amusement; to the other in all his higher and nobler pursuits.

Lord Arncourt could not decide in his own mind whether Eric loved Reine; but he began to think his daughter loved Eric.

She had said once, in speaking of herself, that with her love would be a fire, not a sentiment. Now she was to know how true her words were, for Reine—the proud, beautiful Reine—had learned to love the heir of Nevers-leigh with all the force and passion of which she was capable. < With such ill-regulated natures as hers—cold, hard, brilliant, polished, yet capable of the highest degree of passion—love knows no moderation, no bounds, no medium. } Loving Eric, she must either live or die for him. She had no thought for any one else. Her ideas, her hopes, all began and ended with him. It was the resistless torrent that destroys all obstacles, that brooks no opposition, that will not be stayed, that dashes impetuously on its way, reaching its limit, let the cost be what it might—a fire that destroyed all that opposed its progress—a fire that would consume and burn. Reine

had rightly named it. From the first moment that his proud, handsome head was bent before her, Reine had loved him. It was not a good love. It was not founded on esteem for what were really his good qualities, his noble principles. His handsome face, the winning grace and chivalry of his manner, had first aroused it. She loved him for himself, and not for any qualities that distinguished him.

At first, and for some long time, she was too proud to own her love, even to herself. She resolutely drove from her mind all thoughts of it; she would not acknowledge it. Pride was a master passion with her, and pride forbade her to own to herself that she loved a man who had said nothing yet of loving her.

It conquered her at last; she yielded to it. It was like the intoxication of rare wine, of sweet, subtle perfume. She laid down her pride and coldness at his feet; she confessed to herself that she loved him; and she gloried in her love, she was proud of it. Then she gave up her whole heart and soul to the one task of winning him.

It was not to be done so that he could perceive it. She vowed to herself that she *would* win him—that she would gain from him love such as she gave him; and it remained to be seen whether, with all her beauty, her skill, her genius, she could accomplish her ends.

“There could be no love,” so Reine thought, “where there was such laughing, genial friendship as existed between herself and Eric. She must destroy that, then

begin again on a new foundation. It would not be difficult. She had read in the work of some clever writer that, given the opportunity, any woman could marry the man she liked. Now it remained for her to see if that were true."

She considered herself a good judge of character, but she was puzzled; she could not tell whether Eric liked her or not. She tried to test him.

He asked her one evening to sing for him.

"You have such a glorious voice, Reine," he said; "do sing for me. Not one of those French *chansons*, that have no music in them—not one of the German songs, that send me to sleep—but an old English ballad."

She looked up at him with a bright smile.

"A ballad? Yes; I like ballads, Eric. Shall it be one of martial glory—one that will touch your soul as with the music of a mighty clarion—or one that will touch your heart, and bid some sweet fountain flow?"

He laughed.

"I do not think touching hearts is much in your line, Reine," he said.

She folded her hands with the air of one determined to argue the question.

"Why do you say that, Eric? Now do not look satirically at me; I am not in the humor for satire. Why do you say touching one's heart is not much in my line?"

His eyes lingered on her face with an expression that annoyed her.

"Why do you say it?" she repeated. "I insist upon your telling me."

Eric laughed aloud.

"You ought to have been an empress, Reine, you are so imperious. You would clasp those pretty white hands of yours and say, 'Take away that slave and behead him!'"

"My hands are not pretty," interrupted Reine, angrily.

"They are beautiful, then. Does that please you better? They are white and soft, with the least tinge of pink, and each blue vein is clearly marked. I kiss your beautiful hands, Reine, after the fashion of a French chevalier."

"You are always laughing at the French, Eric. I am English; it does not annoy me. Will you give me a plain answer to a very plain question? Why do you say *that* of me? Why should I never touch any heart?"

"Belle!" cried Eric, "come to my assistance. It is with much difficulty that I am endeavoring to defend myself."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"LOVERS' QUARRELS ARE BUT THE RENEWAL OF LOVE."

Belle crossed the room and came up to Eric with a smile.

"I have involved myself in a terrible dilemma, Belle," said Eric; "I have told Reine a certain truth, and she does not like it."

"I am afraid that few people ever do like the truth," said Belle. "Tell me what it was."

Eric repeated the words.

"I maintain," he continued, "that they are perfectly correct. Reine has no talent for sentiment—has she, Belle?"

The gentle girl looked at her brilliant, beautiful sister.

"I can hardly tell," she replied. "Reine does not indulge in sentiment in small things; but I have no doubt that if she did entertain any idea of the kind, it would be a strong one."

"Then I confess myself conquered," laughed Eric. "The verdict is against me; Reine, I beg your pardon. I will own that you *can* touch any one's heart when you *will*. Now, will you sing for me?"

A pleased, softened expression came over her face, her dark eyes were eloquence itself.

"I will sing anything you like, now that you have done me justice. You must come and turn over my leaves—no, not that—I sing from memory ; but you must stand by me."

"I am flattered beyond description," said Eric.

She went across the room, her white evening dress sweeping the rich crimson carpet. She sat down to the piano, and Eric took his station by her side.

"Nearer," she said, "that I may look at your face for inspiration while I sing."

He could not help admiring the picture—the white hands that gleamed on the ivory keys, the beautiful face, the dark, bright eyes, so eloquent with passion, the lips so sweet and eloquent with song, the graceful neck, the perfect symmetry of the white shoulders—his eyes had never rested on a fairer face, yet his heart did not soften with anything like love.

Then her voice arose, so sweet and clear, low, ringing, and full of music ; such a voice as the ancients of old gave to the sirens ; and Eric listened, charmed even against his will. She sang one quaint ballad after another until his heart was strangely touched, and the tears stood in his eyes. She sang of love that never died, of troth that was never broken, of faith that had never faltered ; she sang until the depths of his heart were touched, and fancy had taken him to another world.

Then she ceased, and the spell was broken ; it was as though some celestial harmony had suddenly ceased. She turned to Eric with a smile.

“ You *have* conquered, Reine. I shall never doubt *your* power of touching hearts again. How am I to thank you ! ”

“ I am more than repaid if I have given you pleasure,” she replied.

And she looked so lovely with that tremulous smile on her lips, that Eric’s gaze lingered on her. Then he caught a glance from Belle ; there was no reproach in it, only something of pained wonder and surprise—a glance that drew him quickly from Reine’s side ; for which the beautiful, willful girl could have slain her gentle rival.

“ I have made him listen to me,” she said ; “ I have pleased him ; I do not think any woman’s voice ever made his heart beat before mine did ; and his eyes looked kindly at me. Shall I win him ? If there be magic in beauty and power in kindness, I will.”

Lord Arncourt gave a grand ball in honor of a celebrated statesman, who was visiting with his wife and children in the neighborhood ; he said to Madame de St. Lance :

“ I wish you, madame, personally, if you will, to attend to my daughter’s toilet. Lady Clements is a great favorite at court, and I should like Reine to make a most favorable impression on her. Let no expense or trouble be spared to make both the girls as beautiful as possible.”

Great preparations were made for the ball ; the state rooms were thrown open ; Lord Arncourt sent to London for music ; there was an endless profusion of flowers and decorations of all kinds.

"Belle," said Eric, the day before the one appointed for the ball, "you will give me the first dance, will you not?"

The girl's fair face flushed.

"That will be the only enjoyable part of the evening to me," he continued. "I do not care for balls ; I am not fond of dancing, but I shall enjoy that."

She did not like to say : "So shall I," but he read the words in the clear, frank eyes.

That same evening he was standing with Reine on the terrace, when Lord Arncourt joined them.

"Eric," he said, "I have been wishing to see you. You must open the ball with Reine, remember."

"Why, papa?" she asked.

"My dear child, it is a matter of etiquette, not inclination ; although in this case they will probably go together. You, as my daughter, as mistress of the house ; Eric, as my heir ; it could not be otherwise."

"Unfortunately," said Eric, carelessly, "I am engaged. I asked the favor of a young lady's hand for that dance, and I must keep my engagement."

Reine's dark eyes flashed one glance at him, then drooped sadly. Lord Arncourt looked slightly annoyed ; he wished the whole neighborhood to understand that the

two were lovers ; nothing would give a better idea of this than the fact of their opening the ball together.

“You must oblige me in this instance, Eric,” he said ; “etiquette demands it ; I wish it ; and I am quite sure that you will not refuse. Tell the young lady, whoever she may be, and she will understand.”

“If you really make a point of it, Lord Arncourt, I will do as you wish, that is,” continued Eric, “with your daughter’s permission.”

“My permission does not seem to be necessary,” said Reine, proudly.

Her father walked away, satisfied with Eric’s promise, thinking most probably that they would come to a better understanding if they were left alone. Then Reine turned haughtily to him.

“I would rather never dance again—I would rather never go near a ball while I live, than that you should be compelled to dance with me against your will.”

Despite the hauteur of her manner, and the pride on her face, Eric saw tears in her eyes, and that sight tormented him. He was naturally gentle of heart.

“My dear Reine, how mistaken you are. I never said or thought dancing with you against my will. How can you say such a thing to me? I merely said that I had asked some one else for that same dance. Suppose that Lord Clements had asked you, and you, in consequence, refused me, that would not mean that you did not care to dance with me. Ladies do not understand logic.”

"We understand something much better," replied Reine "You must have been in a great hurry to have engaged any one."

She turned away, but Eric followed her. The hurt tone of her voice touched him.

"Reine," he said, "you are angry with me, I am sure."

"I do not see that it can matter to you if I am," she replied.

He went to the flower-garden and gathered a most beautiful blush rose ; it was a flower perfect in shape and in color, beautiful, too, in its rich fragrance.

"Will you accept this peace-offering?" he asked.

She turned round, and her dark eyes looked steadily at him.

"No," she replied. "Take it to the young lady whom you were so anxious to dance with."

"I knew you were angry, Reine, and it is very unjust of you."

Yet as he spoke his face flushed. It looked very much like jealousy, this strange conduct of Reine's, and yet how absurd ; she could not possibly be jealous of him—they were friends, not lovers.

Then Reine's mood changed. She raised her face to his, and its marvelous beauty was deepened by a radiant smile.

"Do you want to make friends with me?" she asked.

The beauty of that smile almost startled him.

"Yes," he replied ; "indeed I do."

"Then I will forgive you on one condition—that you tell me the name of the young lady you asked to dance with you. Will you do that, Eric?"

"Why do you wish to know?" he asked.

"That I may hate her," she *thought*; but she *said* nothing of the kind.

"Simply from curiosity, Eric; that is all."

Some prudential instinct caused him to hesitate. There was something in it he could not understand.

"I cannot tell you that, Reine; seriously speaking, I do not think it honorable."

"I thank you for thinking me capable of asking you anything it would not be honorable to tell."

She swept away with the dignity of an insulted queen, leaving Eric with the rose in his hand.

"Reine!" he cried; but Reine never moved her head. She was deaf to his voice. She did not look round even as she quitted the terrace.

Eric was half-piqued, half-amused.

"I will make her accept this rose," he said to himself. "She is very proud, but she shall not have it all her own way."

They did not meet again until dinner-time; then Reine was looking unusually beautiful. She wore a low dress of rich velvet, with point lace. Eric spoke to her two or three times. She pretended not to hear him.

"Reine," said Lord Arncourt, at length, "Eric is speaking to you. Do you not hear him?"

She looked at her father with the most charming smile.

"We are not friends," she said. "I am not going to speak to him again until he tells me something I wanted to know."

Lord Arncourt smiled to himself, thinking :

"Lovers' quarrels are but the renewal of love."

CHAPTER XXIX.

"DO NOT LOVE HIM."

Madame de St. Lance looked up as Reine spoke ; there was something in the sound of the girl's voice that attracted her attention. Then, for the first time, it struck her that Reine was like the handsome young heir. Madame looked long and anxiously at the girl ; the idea, seemingly, was not quite pleasant to her.

"I must talk to Reine," she said to herself. "My other idea is correct, I am sure."

Throughout dinner Reine never once addressed Eric, or heard what he said. He laughed at first, then the better nature in him triumphed. He began to think that he must have seriously offended her ; after all, it could not have been agreeable to her, the daughter of the house. He reproached himself, and, after the fashion of all men when they are properly treated, began to think that he was in fault. He bore his punishment patiently ; Reine seemed most serenely unconscious of his existence. At last he went up to her.

"I cannot bear it any longer," he said. "Reine, we *must* be friends ; you have punished me sufficiently."

"Will you tell me who it was ?" she asked, suddenly.

"Anything but that, Reine. You would not even care to be friends again if you thought I did anything a man should not do."

She made a desperate effort to control herself.

"You are right," she replied, frankly, "and I am wrong. I will not ask you to tell me, although, woman-like, I should dearly love to know."

Then he went and brought the rose he had gathered.

"You will take this from me now," he said.

And Reine, holding out her white hand, took it. She placed it in the bodice of her dress.

"I shall fancy all the evening," she said, "that you are whispering sweet messages to me."

Eric thought of those words. He could not quite understand it; he was not quite vain enough to think that every girl was in love with him who showed him an especial regard, but he did not understand Reine; she treated him quite differently to every one else. Her face took quite another expression when she looked at him, her voice quite another tone.

His opinions influenced her; if he admired a color, she adopted it; if he praised a dress, she wore it. Proud though she was, she deferred to his judgment, his tastes, his ideas, and she did not conceal it.

For Reine kept her word. By dint of flirting, quarrelling, arguing, disputing, by one means or another, she contrived to keep herself in his thoughts. She constantly asked him to execute little commissions for her, so that

she managed to keep some thought of her always before his mind. She never allowed him to forget her; she identified herself with every interest of his.

He could not understand it; if he had been vainer he would have known at once the cause of all her piquant, charming ways and manners.

All that evening she was irresistible. He looked at her beautiful face, at the flower she seemed to cherish for his sake, and he could not help owing to himself that she was most bewitching when she chose; that no one was more amiable, when it pleased her, than Reine Arn-court.

That same evening, before they parted for the night, Madame de St. Lance went to the young girl.

"Reine," she said, "if you are not tired. I want you to walk on the terrace with me."

A promenade with madame offered no temptation to Reine, especially as Eric was in the drawing-room. She looked round half-impatiently.

"I do not care for walking to-night," she said.

But madame was determined she should go. With her quick instinct she divined the cause of that refusal.

"I would not ask you," she said, "if you were engaged here. Belle is reading, Lord Arn-court and Mr. Chilvers talking; you are quite disengaged, come with me."

Reine gave one glance at Eric. True, he was talking,

and that so busily he did not even seem aware of her presence.

"It is too much trouble to argue the matter," she said, carelessly. "I will go if you wish it."

But madame had seen the one quick glance, and knew all about it. They went out on to the terrace, where the beautiful moon made light and shadow.

"We used to have long conversations," said madame; "now there seems no time for a word."

"It is a beautiful life," replied Reine, quickly—"just the life I always longed for."

"Then you are quite happy?" asked madame, and something in her voice made Reine wonder.

"Certainly I am. How could I be anything else?"

"I am glad to hear it, Reine. You must remember that you have been to me as my own child for many years; I want to talk to you as though you were my own child still."

"You are not going to lecture me?" said the girl, laughingly.

"No, my dear; I am only about to warn you. Reine, tell me honestly, do you like Eric Chilvers?"

The face flushed crimson, then grew deadly pale. She hesitated for a few minutes in a manner quite unlike herself.

"Like him!" she repeated; "most certainly I do."

"I mean a little more than that, child. Years ago I learned to read human hearts and human faces—I have

read yours, and I wish to warn you. You like him ; *do not learn to do more; do not love him*, Reine."

"Am I likely to give my love before it is asked?" cried Reine.

"My dear, you come of a race whose descendants do not always stop to think."

"I have heard no wrong of the Arncourts, madame," she said.

Then she stopped abruptly, for madame's eyes were fixed upon her in a vague, bewildered manner.

"I repeat it," she said, proudly; "I have heard no wrong of the Arncourts."

Madame seemed to recover herself.

"Neither have I, Reine ; but have patience and listen to my warnings. Do not learn to love Eric Chilvers; for, unless I am mistaken, he cares for you as a friend, as the daughter of the house, as a pleasant companion, but nothing more."

They walked on in silence for some minutes, then madame said :

"You have heard me, Reine ; will you promise to be guided by my advice?"

"I *have* heard you, madame, and it is quite sufficient. I decline to give my promise. I beg that you will never annoy me again by mentioning the same subject."

Then madame knew by the tone of her voice that it would be useless to speak any more.

"Will you come in now, Reine?" she asked, when

they had walked up and down in silence a few minutes longer.

"Not just yet," she replied ; "the night is fine, I will stay a little longer."

There was a tremor in her voice, and madame wisely left her to herself. She re-entered the house. Reine went up to the stone parapet and stood leaning over it.

Lord Arncourt looked up when madame came in alone.

"Where is Reine?" he asked.

"The night is so beautiful," said madame, diplomatically, "she preferred remaining out a short time."

After a few minutes had elapsed, Lord Arncourt thought he would do a very clever thing.

"Eric," he said, in a low voice, "will you go and tell Reine I think it is time she came in?"

He went. At first he could see no one, then the glimmer of the moonlight fell upon a velvet dress ; he saw a fair head bent so as to touch the cold, white stone. He went up to her. She did not hear him.

"Reine," he said, gently.

She raised her head quickly, and then, to his distress, he saw the beautiful face wet with tears.

"Reine, what troubles you?" he asked.

"Nothing," she replied. "I think the moonlight has made me sad ; it has made me think of my beautiful France."

CHAPTER XXX.

"WOE TO ANYTHING THAT OPPOSES MY LOVE !"

The night of the ball, and Neversleigh looks as it had not looked since the duke's daughter reigned there. It is full of life, of gayety, of merriment ; the sound of beautiful music falls on the ear ; the air is warm and fragrant with the breath of flowers ; lovely faces, shining jewels, gleaming fountains—all combine to make the old abbey like Fairy-land.

The queen of that gorgeous throng is undoubtedly Reine, Lord Arncourt's daughter. Her dress is of violet and gold, with its full folds and sweeping train ; it accords well with her regal style of beauty. Lord Arncourt has presented her with a magnificent set of diamonds. They glitter on the graceful arched neck, on the white breast, in the coils of dark hair, and on the rounded arm. They add a sheen and luster to her beauty ; they seem to draw all the light to themselves. She had never looked more beautiful than on this night, perhaps the happiest of her life. The quarrel with Eric has been quite made up ; in fact, he has seemed kinder than ever to her. He had not given her credit for so much tenderness of heart, for so sensitive a disposition. He reproached himself for having

misjudged her, and believing that he had done her an injustice, he tried to atone for it.

This she misunderstood when she detected the unusual gentleness of his voice.

"He is beginning to love me," she thought. "I shall win him yet."

On this evening of the ball she was in the highest possible spirits; she was dizzy with happiness and success. She was conscious of her own beauty, of her exceeding loveliness. She was the only daughter of this rich man, whose wealth seemed boundless. She was not his heiress, but the chances were a hundred to one that she would marry the heir, and share this grand inheritance.

Better than all this was the fact that the man she loved so dearly was beginning to care for her. He had spoken so gently and so kindly to her. The laughing, teasing manner in which he usually addressed her was changed to one of half-tender deference. He would love her in time, and that one thought filled her with unutterable happiness. Wealth, rank, position, were all well in their way, were all to be envied, but they were as nothing compared to love. She smiled to herself as she thought how dearly she loved him.

"I, who laughed at love and lovers—I, who thought there was nothing on earth desirable but money—I told the truth when I said love would be a fire with me. Woe to anything that opposes it!"

The gorgeous company had all assembled; the rooms

were full; the first sound of the music had announced that dancing was about to begin; the lights, flowers, and jewels, the rich dresses and beautiful faces made a tableau never to be forgotten by those who saw it. Eric went to Reine to claim her hand. She looked up at him without one word.

"Do you see what flowers I have chosen?" she said, showing him a bouquet of beautiful blush roses.

He smiled; he was more touched than he cared to own by her evident liking. He did not suspect that it was more.

"I am afraid the sight of them will cause you to remember our quarrel," he said.

"It will rather teach me never to quarrel again," she replied.

Many were the significant glances cast upon them.

"That will be a match," said one to another; "and it seems both fitting and right that Lord Arncourt's daughter should marry his heir."

Lord Arncourt himself watched them with delight.

"They are a noble pair," he thought; "Eric so grand and stately, Reine so brilliant and beautiful."

As he stood there looking at them, Madame de St. Lance came up to him. There was a troubled look on her face.

"I must congratulate you, my lord," she said, "on the beauty of your daughter; how happy she seems."

There was something significant in madame's voice, that caused Lord Arncourt to look at her.

"She is happy," he said ; "she is always happy with Eric. Do you not think so, madame?"

"I do not know ; I cannot tell ; but if it *should* be so, I hope he feels happy with her ; it would not do for the happiness to be all on one side."

"There can be no fear of that, madame, where Reine is concerned ; there can be no man living who would not be proud even of a smile from her."

"If he did not love some one else," interrupted madame, quickly.

"And that Eric does not ; he is heart-whole and fancy-free, I believe, but for Reine."

"I hope it may be so. Is it your wish, Lord Arncourt—would such a marriage please you?"

"It would delight me more than anything else in the world," he replied ; "and if you can do anything to forward it, you will win my everlasting gratitude."

But madame turned away with a sigh ; she evidently felt that all was not so sure as he imagined.

"Trouble will come of this," she said to herself. "Reine is not to be opposed, and Eric has a strong will of his own. Trouble will come of it."

Even madame's worst fears gave her no hint as to how dark and terrible that trouble would be. Strong as she was, accustomed to endure, she would have died of the horror such knowledge would have brought her.

The first dance was over, and Reine, leaning on Eric's arm, walked slowly down the drawing-room. Admiring glances followed her.

"How beautiful she is," said one to another; "how bright and graceful!"

But neither the sheen of the gold on her dress, nor the glitter of her costly jewels, could compare with the radiance of her face and the light in her proud, dark eyes.

She was supremely happy; she saw how great was the admiration bestowed upon her; she saw, too, the significant glances, and she knew that most of the people there would think she was betrothed to Eric.

"It is not true yet," she said, "but it shall be soon."

"Where is Belle?" asked Eric. "I do not see her."

They looked among the glittering throng, but the sweet face was not to be seen. Just then madame passed them, leaning on Lord Clement's arm.

"Have you seen Belle?" asked Eric.

"No; I have not."

And Reine wondered at the coldness of her tone.

"You seem very anxious over her," laughed Reine. "There is no need for anxiety; she is sure to be enjoying herself."

But Eric thought different. He had seen the shade of sadness, when he told her of Lord Arncourt's desire that he should open the ball with Reine, yet she had most gracefully and gently released him from his promise.

"Lord Arncourt is quite right," Belle had said ; "it could not be otherwise ; we had forgotten that."

"And you will not mind it, Belle ; if you do, if it brings ever so slight a shadow to that sweet face, I shall refuse, no matter what it costs me."

Then she had looked up at him with a smile.

"There is no shadow on my face," she said ; "and, Eric, you must do as Lord Arncourt says."

But the shadow *was* there, he felt sure of it ; and Eric Chilvers loved Belle enough to have risked even his heirship for her sake. It had grown upon him day by day, this great love, until it engrossed his whole thoughts ; he had but one idea from morning until night, and that was Belle.

He loved her with all the force of his soul, with all the strength of his manhood. He loved her better than his life and everything in it. He loved her with the one great love it is given to each one once in life to know—but the love that is so seldom successful.

It had grown upon him almost unknown to himself. From the first moment he saw her sweet face he loved it with a wonderful love. He was not vain, but it certainly seemed to him that Belle, shyly, timidly, gave him some degree of liking in return.

She was not brilliant like Reine, but there was a certain high-bred, gentle elegance about her, that seemed to Eric far more charming than Reine's brilliant beauty. It was not long before he said to himself that the whole happy

ness of his life depended on her ; that he would win her if she was to be won ; that he would rather be blessed with the treasure of her love than reign over a kingdom. He had not told her so as yet—so sweet, so shy, so gentle. She was so serenely happy that he feared to disturb her.

He was not vain, but yet he could not help thinking that Belle cared for him. She showed it in a thousand ways ; her face flushed, and her lips trembled when he entered a room where she was. She avoided him with a coy, pretty avoidance ; yet when forced to be with him, she seemed happy in his society, as a bird among the trees.

It was so different from the manner in which Reine showed her liking—it was no wonder that he noticed it.

Of one thing he was resolved, and that was—he would make Belle his wife. He thought her graceful loveliness far more lovable than the brilliant beauty of Reine.

So, loving her as he did, better than anything else on earth, it was no wonder that on the evening of the ball, he asked continually, “Where is Belle?”

CHAPTER XXXI.

"I LOVE YOU, ERIC!"

Eric saw her at length. She was talking to Lady Clements; but to his fancy it seemed that the dear face was still somewhat overshadowed. Belle looked—as some people thought—even more beautiful than her brilliant rival. Her dress of white silk was trimmed with crimson flowers, one deep crimson rose lay in the waving masses of dark hair, one nestled in the white breast. She had no diamonds, but Lord Arncourt had presented her with a set of pearls, and they seemed to suit her graceful style even better than diamonds would have done.

Eric hastened to join her, but Lord Arncourt interrupted him. He wanted to ask something about a guest who had been invited, but who was not present. It was many minutes before Eric could free himself; then he looked round, but Lady Clements was alone. Belle had disappeared again. The music for the second dance began, and she had promised it to him.

"I must look for her," he thought. "How strange that she should not be waiting for me."

He would not have considered it strange had he known that Belle's heart was heavy with a new pain. She had

overheard so many of the remarks made about Reine and Eric. She had heard people say how well suited they were to each other; she had heard others whisper that Lord Arncourt's daughter was sure to marry his heir, and, although she did not quite know why, the words had smitten her with a fresh and terrible pain. Yet, she asked herself, why should it be so?—what seemed more feasible than that Lord Arncourt's daughter should marry his heir?—how suitable such a marriage would be. Why should she feel this strange pain?

Yet it was there, heavy at her heart, bringing warm tears to her eyes. She stole from the brilliant throng; she passed through the conservatory out into the grounds, where she could try and make out what was the matter with herself, and why the idea of a marriage between Reine and Eric should give her such pain.

There was a pretty little grotto at one end of the terrace. Lord Arncourt had given orders that it should be illuminated. The soft gleaming of the lamps attracted her attention. She went and took a seat there.

There came to her the distant sound of music, and the night sky was studded with a thousand golden stars. The flowers were all fragrant; the birds slept. She could see the deep, clear water of the lake, and hear the faint rustle of the wind among the trees.

"How peaceful and calm!" thought Belle. "Earth is very fair. How much fairer will heaven be?"

She sat there thinking, engrossed by the fair, peaceful

beauty of the scene. Suddenly she heard footsteps near. Raising her head, she saw Eric coming quickly toward her.

"Belle!" he said, gently. "Ah! I thought I could not be mistaken. I saw the glimmer of scarlet and white in the distance. Why did you run away?"

"I wanted to be alone," she said.

"Why, Belle, there is the shadow on your face again. What is it doing there?"

By the faint light of the lamps that sweet face looked very fair. He looked admiringly at it.

"You have been thinking all kinds of sad thoughts," he said. "Tell them to me, Belle."

He drew nearer, and her face flushed crimson.

"Nay," she said. "Why should I tell you my thoughts, Mr. Chilvers? I can hardly understand them myself. Why should I tell them to you?"

"Because, my darling, my beautiful Belle, I love you! Nay, do not turn away from me. I love you with all my heart, and I pray you to be my wife."

She tried to answer, but the words died away on her lips.

"Speak to me, Belle! Oh, my darling, I have frightened you! Your sweet face has grown white, and your hands tremble. Belle, I loved you the first moment I saw you. I have loved you ever since, and it seems to me that I shall love you till I die. I pray you to be mine, sweet.

Do not think me cruel to frighten you so, Belle. You do not know how dearly I love you."

She was still silent, but another look at the sweet face satisfied him.

"You are not angry, Belle? You do not think me presumptuous? You are smiling! Say you love me!"

"I am not quite sure whether I ought to say so," replied Belle.

"If you do not, I shall be the most miserable man under heaven. Say, 'I love you, Eric!' Let me hold those dear hands in mine while you say the words."

She whispered them so faintly only a lover could have heard.

"Heaven bless you, my darling. You are mine now, and nothing shall part us. I shall always remember this evening of the ball as the happiest of my life. You do not know how dearly I love you, Belle."

"I shall know soon," she said, laughingly, "if you persist in telling me so often."

"I should never tire of the telling, sweet. Belle, I can hardly believe I am so fortunate as to win you for my wife; it seems to me quite incredible. I do not deserve such happiness."

He drew the sweet face near to his, and kissed it as though nothing but death could part them; then, with his arm clasped round the slender, graceful figure, he told the story of his love.

He stopped suddenly, for the sweet eyes were fixed on

his face, and they were full of half-wondering, half-wistful reproach.

"What is it, Belle?" he asked. "What are you thinking of? Tell me.

"I am wondering," she said, slowly, "if it is right for me to love you at all."

"You confess, then, you do love me?"

"Ah, Eric, you know *that*; but I wonder if it is *right*?"

"Most decidedly; not only right, but very proper and pleasant—nothing could be more so. Why do you doubt it, Belle?"

She hesitated.

"I hardly know," she replied, "whether I ought to tell you or not."

"Again I say most decidedly. I have a right to know every thought that passes through your mind; above all, those that trouble you. Why are you not *sure* if it be right to love me?"

"You will laugh at me, and I do not like being laughed at. I fear, because I heard so many people saying that Reine and you should marry."

He laughed aloud, and his careless, happy laugh reassured her.

"Were people kind enough to interest themselves so deeply?" he said. "Oh, Belle, you know it is not true! Reine and I have never thought of such a thing."

Her white fingers played nervously with the little gold locket she wore.

"But, Eric, do you think—are you quite sure that Reine does not like you?"

He laughed again.

"She likes me, darling, I hope and believe, but not in the way you mean; we are the best of friends. Why do you ask me?"

"So many people seemed to think it a settled thing. Then I fancied Lord Arncourt looked as though he would like it."

"I do not suppose such an idea has ever entered his mind," said Eric. "As for Reine, we are friends, nothing more; and, as you know, we are not always that."

"Did it never occur to you that marrying Reine would be, as I heard it called to-night, 'a very suitable arrangement?'"

"No; it never did occur to me," he replied. "The only idea that has occurred to me is marrying you."

"Oh, Eric, the ball! I had forgotten all about it," cried Belle. "I only came for a few minutes, but I have been here more than half an hour."

"I shall tell Lord Arncourt to-night what a treasure I have won," he said; but Belle clung imploringly to his arm.

"Not yet," she said; "not yet, Eric. Let me be happy in my love for a short time yet."

"It shall be as you wish, darling," he said, kissing the white hand. "I will not name it until you give me permission."

Then they returned to the ball-room together.

CHAPTER XXXII.

"HAVE YOU FOUND SUCH A ONE?"

"I cannot understand it," said Reine. "I cannot think why he does not care for me. But he shall—he shall. What does fire do with the obstacles that come before it? Destroys them! So will I, should any obstacle come between me and my love. I would destroy it as I do this."

She pulled asunder the leaves of a beautiful flower as she spoke, and scattered the blossoms. Her beautiful face flushed crimson.

"I would have no mercy," she said, "no compassion. I would make my heart hard as a nether stone, and then I would destroy."

Looking at her, so haughty, so proud, so defiant, so daring, there seemed little doubt but that she would keep her word.

Three weeks passed since the evening of the ball, and Belle's secret was still kept. More than once Eric had asked her why she objected so much to having her secret known.

"I have such a presentiment over it," she would reply.

"It seems to me that while my love is a secret it is safe, but that if it ever gets known, it is all over."

"What gives you that foreboding?" he asked.

"I cannot tell; but it is here. It never leaves me—a dull, cold foreboding. My heart seems at times to ache with it."

"But, Belle, darling, that is not reasonable. Why should you feel even dull? No one can oppose us. Although I am Lord Arncourt's heir, I am my own master. Neither he nor any one else can say me nay, on the subject of my marriage. It concerns me alone; and you—who would be likely to refuse you? Not madame; she loves you too well."

"I cannot tell exactly what I fear," said Belle; "but I do think, Eric, these forebodings come as a warning to us. Oh, Eric, why should you be in so great a hurry? We cannot be happier than we are."

"I beg leave to differ," he cried. "I want my wife. I have never known the happiness of having a home of my own; but, when you are my wife, Belle, I shall have a home that will be heaven. Why, my darling, you shudder, you look ill; surely you do not let that tiresome foreboding really trouble you?"

"I cannot help it," she said, sadly. "I would give the world to lose it, but it seems to haunt me. Can there be evil in store for us, Eric?"

"No," he answered, boldly; "as far as I can see it is impossible. What have we to dread? We have faith in

each other. I am not afraid that you will elope with anyone else ; I am quite sure that I shall not. What can there be to fear ?”

“One of us might die,” she said, slowly.

His voice changed ; his face assumed a reverent expression.

“We are all in the hands of God,” he said ; “our lives belong to Him. Have better faith, Belle. Why should you think of death ? You are young and strong as I am.”

“The young, and the dearly loved, have died before now,” she said.

“People have lived, loved, and been happy for many years,” he retorted. “I shall begin to fancy that you are ill, Belle, if you give way in that fashion. Who ever heard of a beautiful young lady giving way to a presentiment ?”

Though he tried to cheer her, and laugh away her fears, still he felt anxious over her. He could not understand why she should have this dull, vague foreboding.

“This ought to be the happiest time of my darling’s life,” he said to himself ; “but it is made wretched by this presentiment of evil, in which she causes me to share.”

At her desire he said nothing to Lord Arncourt, and no one guessed at the love between them. Well might Reine wonder why he was so hard to win ; why her beauty and grace made no impression upon him ; why he never went beyond simple kindness. Belle’s words had put him on his guard. It was bad enough for people to talk of the

probability of a marriage that could never take place. He did not believe that Lord Arncourt desired such a thing—why should he? Reine was beautiful enough to win the heart of a king; she might aspire to any rank. He, blinded by love, could not see, as others saw, the suitability of such a marriage. It did not seem to him particularly appropriate that Lord Arncourt's daughter should marry his heir. He was blind, also, to the passionate love of Reine, the preference she gave him over every one else—in fact, he was blind to everything save the one great truth that he loved Belle, and Belle loved him.

There was no art, no charm that Reine did not employ to bring him to her feet. She would ask him to go out sketching with her, and they would spend long mornings in the beautiful woodlands. She would ask him to read to her such poetry that the eloquent words seemed as though they must win love from him who uttered them. She would sing to him, in the quiet gloaming, such songs as would have moved any man's heart; but neither her beauty, her grace, her genius, nor her gift of song, could win him from his allegiance, or make him love Belle less. He was true to her as the needle to the pole.

"Eric," said Reine, one morning, as they sat under a large cedar tree—Belle was walking with Lord Arncourt at some little distance, and madame sat with some intricate piece of fancy work in the grotto—"Eric, you read poetry very beautifully."

"I am flattered by your compliment, Reine," he replied, laughingly.

"You read love songs so well I could almost fancy you had been in love."

"Fancy is vain, and almost always deceitful, Reine," he said. "Never yield to fancies."

"But, Eric, have you never been in love? I was reading somewhere, the other day, that no man ever attained his twentieth year without having had some severe attacks of it. Is it true?"

"I am not qualified to judge. I have not had several attacks; indeed, I have not had one of the kind you mention. Yet I have attained my twentieth year; indeed, I have passed it."

"And have never yet been in love? I congratulate you."

"I did not say that, Reine. I am not one of those who hold love lightly, who treat it as a jest. To me it is a very sacred and beautiful mystery. 'The lady I loved' would always seem to me far above all other women, far as the stars are from earth. She would seem to me most deserving of esteem and respect, most to be revered—the one woman apart from all others. I should see her face among a crowd, and it would be the only one present to me. I should hear her voice and distinguish it, when perhaps it would reach no other ears. I should love her living and dying. I should be true to her in life and death. That is not the love men treat lightly and hold of little worth."

Her face glowed as she listened to him ; her eyes flashed with a light that was beautiful to see.

"What kind of woman would you love, Eric?" she asked, gently.

"She must be gentle; yet proud ; pure of heart, sweet, and stainless of soul ; she must be capable of giving me in return such love as I give to her ; she must be true ; she must be noble, generous, unselfish ; she must be woman, child, and angel."

"Have you found such a one?" she asked.

The breath came in hot, thick gasps from her lips ; her heart beat fast.

He did not seem to hear her ; his eyes were fixed intently on Belle.

"Eric, have you found such a one?" she repeated.

He smiled a grave, gentle smile.

"I think—I hope I have, Reine," he replied.

She was silent for some little time.

"I must not ask whom?" she said, gently.

"No," he replied. "You shall know some day—soon."

No thought of Belle crossed her mind.

"He loves me," she thought. "I am his ideal, and he will tell me soon."

He, looking at her, wondered at the light that overspread her face.

"How mistaken Belle was!" he thought. "Reine is even pleased that I have found some one to love."

So they played at cross purposes with each other, and each mistake, each little misunderstanding, seemed to bring the tragedy nearer.

Eric joined Lord Arncourt, and Belle, seeing Reine alone, went to her. She was struck by the softened, happy tenderness of the beautiful face.

"How happy you look, Reine!" she said.

"I am happy," she replied. "I have just learned something that will make me happy till I die."

Belle looked at her. There was no misunderstanding what she meant, yet the young girl wondered. Had she received a love letter? Had Eric been delivering a message from some one? That must be it, and yet it seemed strange that he should have said nothing to her.

"I hope you will be happy, Reine," she said, suddenly.

"I think you ought to be—beautiful, bright beings, such as you, do not seem to be born to suffer."

"I do not intend to suffer more than I can help," laughed Reine. "But what of beautiful, bright beings like yourself, Belle?"

"I am neither bright nor beautiful," said Belle, humbly; but Reine, half-patronizingly, assured her that the day would come when some one would consider her both.

"It is wonderful that she does not suspect," thought the girl; but no idea was further from Reine's mind than this—that Eric Chilvers loved and was betrothed to the girl she looked upon as her own sister.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"I DID NOT FIND MY IDEAL AMONG THEM."

The spring came round again, and this season it was imperative, madame declared, that Miss Arncourt should make her *debut*. She told Lord Arncourt so.

"Whatever plan you may have formed for Reine," she said, "that must not be delayed any longer."

And the master of Neversleigh Abbey avowed very frankly that she was right.

There was one thing upon which he was determined. Belle should go with her; Belle should share every advantage. Madame, too, must, if she would, chaperon both young ladies.

A look of great satisfaction came over madame's face. She murmured something about the difference of position. Lord Arncourt would not listen to it.

"They have been like sisters all their lives," he said; "why should any difference be made now?"

Madame said there must always be a great difference between the only child of Lord Arncourt and her daughter, who had no fortune.

"She has her name, madame ; she is a St. Lance, and that is all-sufficient."

So it was arranged ; and when the time came, Lord Arncourt, with his household, went to Laubrae House.

Eric had left them for some time then, and, by Belle's desire, the engagement was still a secret. He was in London, and Lord Arncourt asked him to spend as much time with them as he possibly could.

It was greatly Lord Arncourt's wish that his daughter should be introduced at court. He had intended and hoped that she would make her *entree* into the great world as the betrothed wife of Eric Chilvers. He knew that her beauty, her brilliancy, and the fact that she was his daughter, would cause her to be surrounded with admirers.

"She will have legions of lovers at her feet," he thought. "I can only hope none of them will suit her fancy."

The day came when Reine and Belle made their *debut* before the greatest lady in the land, and, as Lord Arncourt had foreseen, their appearance caused the greatest sensation.

Nothing so beautiful, nothing so lovely as Lord Arncourt's daughter had been seen at the Court of St. James for many years.

There were many people who thought that the young French lady, Mademoiselle de St. Lance, was, if possible,

more beautiful than her friend. They preferred her more quiet grace ; they fancied there was more of the high-bred repose about her than with Miss Arncourt.

The two girls created a perfect furore. Laubrac House was besieged with visitors. People talked incessantly of the beautiful *debutantes*, all the *elite* of London hastened to do homage to them ; and, as a matter of course, there came hosts of lovers.

Some admired their beauty ; others respected their fortune, but many loved them for their own sakes, quite apart from any other motive.

Soon the young Earl of Brandon distinguished himself by his devotion to Lord Arncourt's daughter. He followed her like a shadow ; wherever she went he was sure to go. He was young, handsome, clever ; possessed of one of the oldest names and finest fortunes in England. Young as he was, people had begun to look upon him as a rising man ; there were few more highly spoken of, and he had but one ambition in life, and that was to win the beautiful Reine Arncourt for his wife.

Lord Brandon was one of the most eligible men in England. He had been for the last two years looked upon as one of the greatest matches. Mothers and daughters alike had done their best to win him. The Duchess of Quatretemps, whose daughters were all fair and high-bred, had long desired that one of her daughters should marry the young earl.

Time had been when he had paid some little attention

to the ladies. The youngest, Cecilia, was fair, with golden hair ; and of all the duchess's daughters, she was the most beautiful. Lord Brandon had seemed to admire her very much ; he had flirted with her during the Christmas holidays, and the duchess had entertained great hopes that when they met in London for the season, the conquest would be completed, and her daughter become the Countess of Brandon. It would probably have been so, but for the *debut* of Miss Arncourt. The young earl fell in love with her at once. He had been so much sought after that the fact of his having fallen in love was soon known.

People wondered why Lord Arncourt looked so displeased when the fact of Lord Brandon's great admiration for his daughter was mentioned.

"What could he expect for her?" they asked each other. "Was he waiting for a royal prince?"

It was quite evident that he had no desire to see his daughter Countess of Brandon. He gave no encouragement to the young earl ; he never invited him to Laubrae House, except when his not doing so would have caused some comment. All the attempts that Lord Brandon made to join the riding parties were sure in some quiet way to be frustrated. He would not speak disparagingly of him, but it was noticed that he never praised him or joined in the universal admiration expressed for him. People wondered. Lord Brandon himself, accustomed as he was to admiration, wondered at it.

He wondered at another thing. Reine seemed blind to his merits, as her father was. In vain he wooed her by looks, words, and every chivalrous action he could think of. Sometimes she laughed at him ; whenever she was in one of her happiest moods she teased and bantered him ; but listen to him seriously, or show the least sign of liking for him, was what Reine never did.

Lord Brandon and Eric were fast friends ; they admired each other. The young earl, with the sure instinct of love, felt that in Lord Arncourt's heir he had no rival. He had watched Eric narrowly, and came to the conclusion that he would never love Reine. He would have given all he had for one smile from her, for one kind word.

He had been so much courted, so flattered, that to find himself laughed at by this young girl, whom he worshipped, was almost more than his pride could bear.

"Why can she not care for me?" he wondered. "I love her—I would make her happy ; she should do in all respects just as she would. I wonder why she cannot care for me?"

All fashionable London wondered in the same manner.

Lord Brandon at last took courage, and laid his heart, his fortune, his coronet, and his love at Reine's feet. She refused him, with a careless consciousness that almost bewildered him.

Refused to become Countess of Brandon ; told him, laughingly, that it was no use teasing her—that she really

did not care for him. She seemed as indifferent to his magnificent offer as it was possible to be.

The young earl asked himself, in a half-dazed kind of fashion, what the world was coming to when girls could behave so recklessly.

But her refusal, her gay, girlish laughter, stirred all the manhood within him.

"You do not love me, Miss Arncourt?" he said.

There was not even a flush on the beautiful face as she answered :

"No ; not in the least, Lord Brandon."

He was silent for some minutes, then a new light came into his eyes.

"I know why," he said. "You are more noble, even as you are more beautiful, than other women. I am rich ; but you do not care for riches. He whom you love must be great with the truest greatness. I will make myself worthy of your love, Miss Arncourt ; then I will ask you for it again."

She was touched by his words, and her first impulse was to tell him it was useless, for she loved some one else ; then the words died away on her lips. How *could* she own she loved some one who had never spoken one word of love to her ?

She had tried to arouse Eric's jealousy. Every trifling sign of preference that she had shown him, every kind, laughing word that she had ever uttered to him, had been in Eric's presence.

But, to her great mortification and annoyance, Eric had seemed pleased. When she was kinder than usual, he seemed to share Lord Brandon's pleasure. If he were sitting by her side and the young earl entered the room, Eric always rose and made way for him. That alone irritated Reine.

"It seems as though he wished me to like him," she thought. "And yet, that *cannot* be—he is only trying me."

Strange, that although she kept a strict and jealous lookout for all rivals, she never thought of finding one in Belle. She was pleased with the result of her scrutiny.

Eric was a popular favorite, as Lord Arncourt's heir was sure to be ; but among all the beauties and belles, she could not see that he distinguished one.

"Do you not think the English ladies very fair and beautiful?" she asked him, one evening, as they sat together at the opera. "Look around ; how refined and well-bred, how beautiful many of the faces are !"

He did look round, with a smile.

"I agree with you," he said, laughingly.

"You agree in that careless fashion of yours that always annoys me so greatly ; but you do not seem enthusiastic."

"I did not find my ideal among them," he said.

And her heart beat with triumph ; she fancied he had

found it in France, and that she herself was the ideal of his dreams.

"I shall never envy the Englishwomen their fair, blonde beauty again," she said to herself; "mine has won him!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"WHAT HAD SHE TO DREAD?"

The season was over, and for Reine it had been a most brilliant success. Beautiful, gentle Belle had refused some excellent offers, greatly to Lord Arncourt's wonder. The most eligible of her lovers was Sir Harry Bellairs, a handsome young baronet, who had fallen deeply in love with her.

Lord Arncourt had pleaded his cause, but Belle raised her sweet eyes to his.

"I do not love him, my lord," she said; and after that the master of Neversleigh said no more.

Something in the girl's face—in the pure, earnest, gentle expression—touched him deeply.

"You shall please yourself, Belle," he said; "no one shall persuade you against your will. I would not have spoken, but I like Sir Harry, and think he will make one of the kindest husbands. I shall say no more about it."

And long after she had left him, my lord sat wondering what it was in the girl's face that touched him so deeply; why the sound of her voice seemed to move the very depths of his heart.

"I shall begin to love her better than Reine unless I am careful, and that will never do."

Madame was also very solicitous for the young baronet.

"Why do you not say 'Yes' to him, Belle? You will perhaps never have a better offer."

"I do not want one, dear mamma. Some time or other—not now—I will tell you why I did not say 'Yes' to Sir Harry Bellairs."

Madame tried all her powers of persuasion; she used every argument she could bring to bear on the subject—she said all that was possible. Belle only listened with a sweet smile, and repeated her words.

"I will tell you some day, dear mamma, why I cannot say, 'Yes.'"

The pallor deepened on madame's face as she came away; the lines of care were more strongly marked.

"She refuses him because she loves Eric," said madame to herself; "and mischief will come of it. Mischief will come of it, I am sure."

So the season came to an end, and Lord Arncourt went with his household to Cowes. He invited Eric to accompany them, but Eric declined. He was otherwise engaged.

"The fact is," he said laughingly to Belle, "if I were to go there with you, I must tell Lord Arncourt of our engagement. I should be making love to you, I am sure, and that would never do, unless you are willing for me to speak, Belle?"

But Belle shrank sensitively from making her secret known.

"Wait, Eric," she pleaded, "just a little longer. You will join us at Neversleigh, and we can think about it then."

He obeyed her; and Lord Arncourt went to Cowes, wondering why Eric did not care more about accompanying them. He had not given up his darling project of marrying his daughter to his heir. Circumstances had not, up to the present time, been propitious. But he had great faith in time and opportunity.

The beautiful sea breeze at Cowes brought fresh health and vigor to the two young girls. There, with the music of the waves sounding ever in her ears, Reine gave herself up to the passionate dream of her heart.

She had time then to think of Eric; even amid the hurry and excitement of a London season she never for one moment forgot him. No matter how much she was occupied, deep down in her heart his image was always present. But here she had nothing to take her thoughts from him; morning, noon, and night they were of him alone.

Listening to the grand music of the sea, she allowed the passionate love of her heart to shape itself into thoughts, and the thoughts to form words. She gave herself up to this engrossing love. Earth held no other charm for her, no other hope.

Should she win him? If there be ought in resolution,

force of will, in strength of purpose—yes, she would, at any risk. Why should she fear? She had everything on her side—youth, beauty, talent, and she loved him. Ah, heaven! how dearly she loved him!

“It would be better for me to die than to fail!” she said to herself. “The fire must destroy me if it falls back on me!”

Yet she was neither discouraged nor despairing. True, Eric had not said in so many words that he loved her; but she could not doubt it. She admired him all the more for his silence; she thought it arose from his great consideration for her; that he wanted her to see plenty of the world before he asked her to pledge her faith to him.

“As though that were needful,” she said to herself, with a sweet laugh. “If kings and emperors came to me and asked me to wear a crown, I would refuse for his sake.”

It never occurred to her that Eric had passed her by, and had laid his love at Belle’s feet; she would have laughed such an idea to scorn. Belle win where she had failed!—it would be too absurd. Belle, the penniless daughter of a ruined race—Belle, who had neither “houses, land, nor money,” to outrival her!

Then Lord Arncourt left them at Cowes while he went over to Paris, and there he met Lord Brandon.

How the young earl managed will never be known, but by dint of constant attention and diplomatic conduct he contrived to win from Lord Arncourt an invitation to

Neversleigh. How hard he worked for it could be faintly guessed from the deep sigh of relief with which he heard it.

"I shall see her again," he thought, "and it will be something strange if I fail this time."

Reine smiled when she read in her father's letter that the earl would join them at Neversleigh. Madame looked pleased, and Belle declared herself to be delighted, but Reine was indifferent. She read the remainder of the letter, then suddenly her face flushed crimson.

"Eric is coming !" she cried. "Papa says that we shall be quite a large party."

If she had looked attentively at Belle she would have seen that this intelligence was nothing new to her ; so the tragedy drew nearer, while those who were to be actors in it were all unconscious.

They reached Neversleigh on the close of a beautiful August evening, and Lord Arncourt said there was no time to lose—immediate preparations must be made for the reception of their visitors.

"Papa," said Reine, that same night, "when is Eric coming?"

"He will be here with Lord Brandon on Wednesday," was the reply.

"I wonder why he did not join us at Cowes?" said the girl, musingly.

Lord Arncourt smiled.

"Perhaps he wanted to give us time to miss him, so that we might know his value, Reine."

But Reine flushed crimson.

"Eric *may* have faults, but he is not vain," she cried.

Lord Arncourt was well pleased; he liked to hear his daughter so warmly espouse the cause of his heir. Then Reine continued:

"Why is he coming now, papa? Did you invite him?"

"No; that I certainly did not, Reine. He wrote to me, volunteering to pay us a visit. I was only too pleased to acquiesce."

"I am sorry that tiresome Lord Brandon is coming, too," she said. "I wish he would fall in love with Belle, papa. She refused Sir Harry, but perhaps she would take him."

"I cannot regulate such affairs, Reine. People have a way of pleasing themselves, as you perhaps know."

She did know, to her cost; she knew all about it. She had pleased herself—why should not Belle do the same?

Reine hardly knew how time passed until Wednesday came; it was one long dream of coming happiness to her. Eric had invited himself to Neversleigh, and he could only be coming with one object—that was herself. He was coming to woo and to win her. He had given her time to see something of society, and now he was coming to ask her to be his wife.

She never doubted it. If she had been less engrossed

in her own love affairs, less absorbed in herself, less vain, less selfish, she would have seen that Belle was unlike herself. The time for the revelation of her secret was coming, and Belle was almost ill with fear.

"Fear of what?" she asked herself a hundred times each day.

What had she to dread? It was not probable that any one would interfere with Eric's marriage.

She blamed herself for her weakness in giving way to presentiments. She took herself to task; but the foreboding grew upon her, and she could not help it.

Wednesday came at last, and it seemed to Reine that the sun had never shone so brightly, that the world had never been so fair.

"He will be here before sunset," she said; and she blessed the day.

Her maid had never found her so difficult to please. Her dress was of palest violet and gold. He admired those colors before, and she wanted to show him how she remembered his tastes.

Finn, the gardener, was made quite anxious by the sudden demand for blush-roses.

"No matter whether he had any or not, Miss Arncourt *must* have some;" and he looked round in dismay. By that time Reine's strength of will was too well known for any one to oppose her.

The gardener found the roses, and she wore them in

her dark hair, on her white breast, thinking that they would please him.

But when he came, Eric did not even notice them ; he had quite forgotten the little episode of the blush-rose.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"YOU, ABOVE ALL OTHER MEN!"

The visitors had been at Neversleigh for two days. There had been such a constant succession of new arrivals that no one had formed any plans as yet, neither had there been time for the exchange of many connected words.

Madame was, to all intents and purposes, mistress of the house; but Reine, as Lord Arncourt's daughter, had to receive all guests and provide for their amusement. They were a large and merry party.

Lord Arncourt liked to see young faces around him; he liked the fresh, sweet sound of young voices and happy laughter.

The evening came at length, when Reine found herself, for the first time, at leisure. The dinner had been a great success. Lord Arncourt had looked delighted, and the gentlemen had not lingered over their wine.

Now every one seemed happily disposed of; some were at the piano; one group lingered over an album; there were others intent upon chess.

Looking around, Reine saw none but happy and in-

terested faces. Lord Brandon was talking very earnestly to Belle.

"Perhaps he is falling in love with her," she said to herself. "I wish he would; then he would cease to trouble me."

She little dreamed that the young earl was even then confiding to the gentle girl the story of his love for the brilliant, beautiful Reine, and asking her to help him if she could, as he had already asked Eric.

Reine looked for madame, who was playing at chess; then her eyes lingered on Eric's face, and, strange to say, Eric was looking at her.

She met his gaze, his bright, clear eyes fixed on hers. He seemed to be thinking of her so deeply that he did not even notice her glance.

Reine's face grew crimson, and that seemed to attract his attention. He rose suddenly from his seat, and went over to her.

"Reine," he said, "I want to speak to you."

"I am at your service," she replied, but her eyes drooped from his, and her lips trembled.

"Not here," he said. "I have something to say to you, something very especial, and I do not care to be overheard. Will you come out on the terrace? See, several of our friends are there."

She clasped her hands for one minute as one who prays, then she laid them on her heart, as though she would fain stop its tumultuous beating if she could.

It had come at last—the happy, blissful, blessed moment for which she had longed. It had come—he wanted her, to tell her that he loved her, to ask her to be his wife. The very shock of the happiness made her grow cold and white ; even her lips turned pale.

“Have I frightened you, Reine?” he asked. “I am so abrupt! Never mind, I can wait for another opportunity.”

She raised her dark eyes to his, and the expression startled him.

“I will go with you,” she said.

“But, Reine, what made you turn so pale? You frightened me.”

She made him no answer, but the next minute he saw her out in the moonlight, the moonbeams falling on her dress of violet and gold, and on the blush roses. Never did moonbeams fall on a fairer picture.

They walked in silence to the stone parapet. Roses and passion flowers, all sweet, climbing blossoms, seemed entwined around the slender pillars.

“I want to speak seriously, Reine,” began Eric ; “not in that half-laughing fashion we seem to have adopted, but as one who has your dearest interest at heart.”

It was not much like the commencement of a declaration of love ; but no doubt chilled Reine.

“I am very happy to believe it,” she said, softly.

“It so happens that young people understand each other,” he continued. “You and I do, that I believe,

although we have spent the greater part of our time in badinage.. Still we have a true regard for each other, Reine, have we not?"

"Yes," she said, more faintly.

How long it was coming, yet how intensely she longed to hear it.

"If you thought anything would conduce to my happiness, you would point it out to me, would you not, Reine?"

"Yes," she replied again.

"I see something that I think will make you very happy—will make your future all bright and golden. I want you to consent to it. You are not quite like other girls, Reine; you are very beautiful and brilliant, but you are peculiar. Other girls would not require this little lecture that I am about to give you, if you will let me."

"You may say what you will," she said.

It *must* be coming; it must be that he meant. He had brought her out there to tell her that he loved her, and not for any other purpose. It *must* be so; yet her heart began to beat with a wild, strange fear.

"The time will come when you must marry, Reine. Now, I want you to allow me to talk to you just as though I were your own brother. Lord Brandon loves you very dearly; will you tell me why you cannot love him?"

He saw her face droop to the cold stone; he fancied a

low, muffled cry came from her lips ; but "it was only fancy," he said to himself, and he went on :

"He is a noble man, Reine, if you would but think seriously of him. Give him a patient hearing ; do not laugh at him always. I do not know anywhere a man whom I respect and esteem more highly than I do him."

Still from the girl at his side came no word.

"I should like to see you happy, Reine, and I am sure that he would make you so. He is noble, generous, true, all that a man should be ; and, Reine, such men are not common. He loves you so very dearly, I wish you would try to care for him."

Then she raised her face, all ghastly in the moonlight.

"Do you mean that you wish me to marry him?" she asked.

"Yes : that is what I mean, Reine. And no person living could give you better counsel than that."

Her face fell forward again, and he heard her, in a strange, low voice, cry out :

"Great Heaven ! Have I deserved this?"

"Reine," he said, "you are not angry with me, I hope?"

There was a minute's perfect silence ; then she raised her white face again.

"Angry—why should I be? You know better."

She laughed recklessly ; the very evil spirit of pride seemed aroused in her.

"Why should I be angry?"

He looked at the white face, and the dark, flashing eyes.

"I do not understand you, Reine,"

She laughed, that terrible, reckless laugh, that seemed to fill his veins with fear.

"You never did understand me," she replied; "never, Heaven help me!"

"Reine, you make me very unhappy. What have I done to you? It is simply for your own good, and because I thought you would be really happy if you married Lord Brandon."

He could not help seeing how the slender figure trembled and shook, as a leaf in the wind.

"*You*, to counsel me to marry Lord Brandon!" she cried. "You, above all other men."

"Yes, I, above all other men, Reine; because I feel more interest in you than many men do."

She turned round upon him almost fiercely.

"Interest!" she repeated, with scorn. "I never asked you for interest."

"You never asked me for anything," he said, gently.

"But I expected it," she moaned to herself, rather than to him.

"There need not be any more said, Eric," she continued. "I shall not marry Lord Brandon, and I hope you will never mention the subject again."

But though she controlled her words, the white face told its own story.

He drew back in sudden, startled alarm, for it flashed across him that she loved him.



CHAPTER XXXVI

"YOU HAVE NOT DISPLEASED ME."

The thought that, all unconscious, in all ignorance, he had won that proud heart, was terrible to him ; he would at that moment have given worlds never to have seen Neversleigh.

This proud, brilliant, beautiful girl loved him, and he, in his turn, loved some one else.

Still he was too true a gentleman, too noble a man, to allow his discovery to be perceived. He was quite silent for some moments ; then he said to her, very gently :

"I beg your pardon, Reine ; perhaps I have done wrong in attempting to interfere. Each of us knows best what is pleasing to us."

There was infinite pity or compassion in his voice, but she did not notice it. Something like a mist of tears gathered in his eyes as he looked at her. His considerate kindness for her was greater, now that he knew what her love must cost her.

They had been standing in silence for some minutes, when Reine turned to him suddenly.

"Do not wait for me," she said ; "I am not going in

again. I am tired of people and their voices, altogether tired. I would far rather stay here in the starlight."

He could quite understand why she did not care to return.

"You are right," he said; "I think nothing rests one so much as being alone on a beautiful night like this."

He took one of her hands in his; it was cold as death.

"Shall I fetch you a shawl, Reine?" he asked, "You seem cold and chilled."

"No," she replied. "The greatest kindness you can do for me is to leave me alone."

In the tone of her voice he detected that she had endured as much as was possible; it was best, perhaps, to go.

"Good-night, Reine; and if I have said anything that has displeased you, I pray you to forgive me."

"You have not displeased me," she replied, mechanically. "Good-night!"

He turned away, sad at heart, and left her alone.

Ah, well! Moonlight and starlight have looked upon strange scenes before now, but they never saw a face more convulsed with passion, they never saw such a tempest of pride, scorn, of outraged love, of anger and despair, as raged within the soul of that beautiful girl.

The wind sighed around her, the pale starlight fell on

the sleeping flowers ; but neither calm nor beauty were to touch her then or for evermore.

Eric went back to the drawing-room like one stunned. His discovery fairly frightened him. He tried to argue with himself that it could not possibly be true ; but the conviction was there, and he could not help it.

She loved him. Her face, her eyes, had told him the truth ; her confused words, her passion of anger and despair, the ghastly face, that seemed to rise like an accusing spirit before him, all told the same truth—she loved him, and he had nothing to give her in return.

Was he to blame? While laughter and song, the music of happy voices, floated around him, he asked himself that question—“Was he to blame?” He could not remember that in any one single degree, either by look, word, or action, he had exceeded the bounds of civility and politeness. He had never flirted with her, in the common acceptation of the word ; he had never made the least pretense of loving her. Think as he would, he could not remember ever having said one word that could have misled her. Yet she loved him ; there could be no doubt of it. What was he to do? A sweet voice near him roused him from his sad thoughts.

“Eric, what are you thinking of? You look so unhappy, dear. Surely, you have had no bad news? You are not ill?”

“No, my darling ; I am only perplexed—more perplexed than I can tell you.”

"You can tell me what about," she replied; "and perhaps I can help you."

Eric assumed the lofty air that a man generally takes when he fancies he is cleverly pacifying a woman.

"It is nothing that you would understand, my dear Belle. I am going to ask Sir John Pierrepointe to sing—have you ever heard him?"

Belle was one of the submissive order; she understood perfectly well that the question about Sir John was simply a ruse to divert her attention. She was obedient enough to think to herself that Eric did not wish to tell her his thoughts, therefore she would not tease him.

"I shall be much pleased to hear Sir John," she replied; "also to see your face cleared and to see you smile."

He did smile as he looked at her, so fair, so gentle, so sweet; then he sighed as he remembered the proud, beautiful face in its anguish of despair.

"I thank Heaven, Belle," he said, "that you love me!"

He tried to put all memory of that scene far from him just then; but when he stood once more alone in his own room, he was obliged to look the fact, painful as it might be, in the face.

What was he to do? He blamed himself that he had yielded to Belle's wish, and had kept his engagement secret.

"If she had known that I cared for Belle," he thought, "it *might* have prevented all this."

She must know it at once; common honor, common honesty demand that. He had come to Neversleigh purposely to speak to Lord Arncourt about Belle, and he must do it at once; he would delay no longer. On the morrow he would tell him, and then all would be ended; yet even as he decided on doing so, there came to him a dim sense of the terrible pain she would suffer. Well, true, there was no help for it; he loved Belle, and it was most certainly not his fault if Reine had misunderstood him. There came to him a vague idea that after all there might be some truth in Belle's foreboding. This cloud that had already risen, in some measure obscured his happiness, and shadowed the brightness of his love.

He would see Lord Arncourt, and tell him all; it would be hard to see Reine's white face, and know the grief of that proud heart; but it must be done. He would gladly have borne the pain for her if he could, but it could not be.

The morrow rose bright, warm, sweet, and fragrant; the morning sun fell upon one face, white and worn with most bitter weeping, as though long years had passed over it, and Reine started back with horror as she looked at herself.

"If one night has changed me so," she thought, "what shall I be when a year has passed over my head?"

Eric awoke with a sense of pain quite new to him. He saw Belle in the breakfast-room as he descended the stairs.

"Belle," he said, "wish me all kinds of good fortune ; I am going to speak to Lord Arncourt to-day."

Belle's face grew pale as death.

"I am afraid," she said, nor could Eric this time laugh at her fears.

"You want to speak to me, Eric," said Lord Arncourt, later on ; "I am at leisure now. Will you come into the library with me?"

For once in his life Eric Chilvers lost his self-possession ; yet what had he to fear ? The morning sun fell bright and warm ; the sunbeams fell slanting on the dark oaken floor with its rich crimson carpet. Lord Arncourt took his accustomed seat, and looking at his young heir, said :

"What is it, Eric ? what do you want ?"

Eric was playing nervously with a carved ivory paper-knife that lay on the table. He looked up suddenly.

"My lord," he said, "you have always been kind to me, and I do not fear any lack of kindness now."

Lord Arncourt smiled.

"That sounds as though you were going to ask some favor, Eric. What is it ? You need not fear my refusing you anything you want."

"I have fallen in love, my lord, and I want you to consent to my marriage."

Lord Arncourt's face brightened as though a sunbeam had fallen on it.

"That I am sure you will have," he replied. "I ask no better gift from Heaven than your love for Reine."

But Eric's dismayed face arrested the words on his lips.

"For Reine!" he cried. "I do not love Reine; that is all a mistake. It is Belle I love, and wish to marry."

There was silence for some minutes. Lord Arncourt seemed unable to recover from the terrible blow. Then he spoke, gravely and slowly.

"I can only suppose that I am mistaken," he said. "I had an idea that you loved Reine."

"I think Miss Arncourt one of the most beautiful and gifted women in the world," he said; "but I have never once thought of her in that light. I fell in love with Belle the moment I saw her."

"And does Miss De St. Lance return your affection?" asked Lord Arncourt, gravely.

"She does, my lord. I have her permission to ask your consent to our marriage."

"You have it," he replied. "I have no possible reason for refusing it. I do not mind frankly avowing to you, Eric, that I had other views for you far different. I will tell them to you. It was the great wish and desire of my heart that you should marry Reine."

Eric looked embarrassed; he was at a loss what to say.

"It seemed to me," continued Lord Arncourt, "the most sensible and appropriate thing, that my daughter and my heir should marry. I am disappointed that it is not so; but of course I have no more to say."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"WHY IS IT NOT ALL DIFFERENT?"

The pained, humbled, mortified look on Eric's face seemed almost to touch Lord Arncourt's heart.

"It is always foolish for people to make plans for others," he said. "However, fortunately in this case, there is no harm done. I have not mentioned my wish to any one. Ah! yes—I remember now that I hinted them to madame; but she is discreet. I had thought of this marriage before I ever saw Reine even. When I found her so beautiful and brilliant, my hopes increased."

"She is everything that is admirable," said Eric.

"Only you have not fallen in love with her," said Lord Arncourt, laughingly. "Well, as I said before, there is no harm done; and Miss de St. Lance is a most charming girl—gentle, well-bred, and beautiful. You could not have chosen more wisely, Eric. You will be very happy with her, I am sure."

"Then I have your permission?" said Eric, gravely.

"You have my full consent and best wishes. It is rather a matter of form than otherwise, your asking me,

Eric. I have no authority over you, and madame is Belle's sole guardian."

But Eric, with a grace all his own, bent down and kissed Lord Arncourt's hand.

"I owe you the deepest honor and deepest respect," he said. "I would do nothing without consulting you first."

"You must go to madame now, and—ah, me! Eric, I envy her the happiness of calling you her son-in-law. I am busy now, and cannot discuss details with you. Later on we will make all arrangements for your marriage, and what income, as heir of Neversleigh, will meet the requirements of your position. Go to madame now; it is her consent that is of such vital importance, not mine."

Eric saw that Lord Arncourt wished to be alone, and having expressed his most grateful thanks, he went away.

"I seem to have disappointed everybody," he thought, as he went to madame's room; "but I could not help loving Belle."

He found Madame de St. Lance sitting quite alone, with the same sad, constrained, worn-out look on her face that had always struck him. She glanced at him in alarm, and her face grew even paler.

"You want to speak to *me*, Mr. Chilvers! What can you possibly want with *me*?"

"I will tell you. madame."

And standing before her, his graceful figure quite erect, his hand resting on the table, he told the story of his love.

To his intense surprise, when she had heard it, she buried her face in her hands and wept, after a dreary, hopeless fashion, that filled him with dismay.

"Madame," he cried, "I pray you do not do that! You are not angry with me, surely, that I love your beautiful Belle?"

"Belle!" she repeated. "Oh, Mr. Chilvers, why is it not all different?—why do you not love Reine?"

He looked at her in bewildered surprise.

"You speak as though love were within one's control, madame. It is not. I love Belle, and no other."

But madame paid little attention to him; she was weeping bitterly.

"Reine, poor Reine!"

"Why should you pity Reine?" he asked. "Lord Arncourt's daughter cannot surely need pity."

She seemed to make a desperate effort to recover herself.

"I did not ask *you* to pity her," she said. "Oh, Eric Chilvers, what mischief you have made!—what sorrow you have wrought! Why did we ever come to this fatal place?"

He looked at her in utter wonder.

"My dear madame," he said, "are we not somewhat beside the mark? I ask your permission to marry your

daughter, the girl whom I love, and you accuse me of making mischief!"

"Not in that sense of the word. You did not understand me, Eric. I speak without thinking. You ask me if you may marry Belle. Have you made no mistake?"

She folded her thin white hands, and raised them as though she would pray to him.

"Are you sure there is no mistake?" she repeated. "Is it not Reine you love?"

"I have made no mistake," he said. "I love your daughter, Belle de St. Lance; she loves me, and I ask your permission to marry her."

"Suppose I refuse permission—what then, Eric?"

"You would not be so unjust, madame. You cannot in honor refuse. Why should you?"

"But what if I *do*?" persisted madame.

"We Englishmen are famed for tenacity of purpose," replied Eric, with a charming smile. "If you refuse consent, I am afraid I should follow Belle all over the world until I persuaded her to run away with me. I am very frank, you see, madame."

"Would you forget her in time, and love some one else?"

"No, that I never should, madame. Belle is my only love; I shall never love another."

She looked long and earnestly in his face, her own streaming with tears.

"I believe you, Eric," she said. "Only Heaven knows

how it will end! I give my full consent, because I see that you will love Belle, and no one else."

"I can tell you how it will end," he said, laughingly. "You will see Belle the happiest wife in the world, beloved and beautiful, honored and esteemed, held in highest reverence. Then you will say, 'I did well to give her to Eric, after all.' You will regret exceedingly that you ever made either yourself or me sad with dismal forebodings."

She tried to look more cheerful, but failed in the effort.

"I can only hope it will be so," she said. "Have you spoken to Belle?"

He laughed.

"I am very happy, madame. Belle loves me, and has promised, if you are willing, to be my wife."

"I hope you will be happy," said madame, gravely.

Then Eric went away.

"My darling will surely be brighter than her mother," he thought. "I have not met with a very cheerful recognition of my love at present."

When he had left her, madame rose from her seat; she clasped her hands as though in wild appeal. "It will come!" she cried; "I can see it in the distance."

Then Eric, having won such consent as he considered needful, went in search of Belle. He found her standing by the lake, watching the white swans.

"I could not remain in the house," she said. "I felt so uncomfortable, so anxious."

"I have nothing but good news, my darling," he said. "Lord Arncourt gives his unqualified consent, with the kindest of wishes. Madame does the same."

He had no intention of deceiving her, but he would not cloud her happiness by telling her of the strange reception he had met from both.

"Now there remains but one thing to be done, Belle—that is, for you to tell me when you are willing to be my wife. I have waited a long time ; I have done my best to please you. You must please me now, Belle ; it is only fair. This is the end of August—will you promise to be my wife when October comes?"

"I do not suppose you have given me the alternative of saying no," she replied, with a blush. "It shall be so, if you wish, Eric."

So it was decided they were to be married in October, and Eric believed that at length there was an end to his troubles.

"Belle," he said, "I have an especial and most particular reason for wishing our engagement to be made as public as possible. You will allow me now to speak of it?"

"Will you tell me your reason, Eric?" she asked, with feminine curiosity.

"I would much rather not, my darling. Do not ask me."

Like the submissive, gentle girl she was, she did *not* ask, and Eric was relieved by her silence.

"I'm going to tell Lord Brandon myself at once ; and, Belle, my darling, among all your lady friends who has the reputation of being the greatest gossip ?"

"Miss Braderniss," she replied, with a prompt simplicity that charmed him.

"Then tell it to her as a great secret, and you may be sure that the news will soon spread," said Eric, for which cynical sentiment Belle reproved him severely, and was most properly indignant.

Eric, however, had his own special reasons. They had one hour of untold happiness out among the sunshine and flowers—one hour when they forgot that earth had its cares, and remembered only that the gates of Paradise were open for them. Then Eric went away and sought Lord Brandon. He told him his news, and the young earl congratulated him most warmly.

"I am afraid, Eric," he said, "that I shall never have such good news for you. Miss Arncourt does not as yet give me a gracious look."

The sunshine of his own happiness was in Eric's heart; he saw all things through its medium.

"I should persevere," he said. "Such love as yours deserves its reward."

"Do you think perseverance in this case will win the prize?" asked Lord Brandon, anxiously.

"I do. Miss Arncourt is a very noble girl ; she can appreciate fine qualities, and there is nothing so fine as perseverance and fidelity."

"You give me courage," said Lord Brandon. "I have not seen Miss Arncourt to-day. Ah ! there she is. I will join her."

"You need not keep what I have been telling you a secret," said Eric. "You can speak of it if you choose."

He was anxious that the news should be told to her by some one before whom she would be unwilling to betray herself.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"HOW LONG HAS HE LOVED HER?"

Lord Brandon hastened to join Miss Arncourt. He saw the blooming flowers as he passed by, but none there seemed to him so fair as the beautiful girl he loved so perseveringly.

"Who so fair," he asked himself, "as she? Who so graceful?"

If he could only win her for himself—win her and keep her in his heart, he would be happy for evermore.

He went up to her. She was standing by the rose-garden, her white hands toying carelessly with a beautiful rose. She knew that he was coming, yet her eyes never glanced at him; their expression was one of proud, cold, wearied indifference.

When Lord Brandon drew near enough to look in her face, he was startled by the terrible change in it. The youth, the beauty, the exquisite bloom, the radiance—all seemed to have died out of it, and given place to a haggard care and gloom.

"Miss Arncourt!" he cried, in wonder.

Slowly she turned her dark, beautiful eyes on him.

"Do you want me?" she asked.

"I saw you, and thought I should like to ask you how you were, but you surprised me."

"To be easily surprised shows a weak mind," she said, with a miserable attempt at her old gayety of manner.

"I am quite content to be considered weak-minded, if you choose to call me so," he said, with a bow and a smile. "But, Miss Arncourt, do pray assure me that you are not ill."

"There is little need to assure you of the fact when you find me standing before you in perfect health," she replied.

"But you look so changed—do not frown ; you know the least shadow of a frown from you makes me miserable. I will not say that you look ill if it displeases you ; I will keep my thoughts to myself."

"Perhaps that will be the wisest thing for you to do," she said, dryly.

She was annoyed that the pallor of her face should be noticed.

"I wonder, Miss Arncourt," said the young earl, "what I could do to win one smile from you ?"

"I cannot tell," she replied ; "nor do I see why you should trouble yourself about my smiles."

"You know how dearly and how desperately I love you," he retorted, "and you might be just a little kinder to me."

She laughed wearily.

"You know how little I believe in love at all," she said. "It is only a poet's fallacy, a poet's dream."

Yet, even as she spoke the words, a sharp pain in her own despairing heart told her how untrue they were.

"I ought not to give way to envy on such a beautiful morning as this," said Lord Brandon; "but I feel terribly inclined to envy Eric Chilvers."

Her heart beat at the sound of that name; a hot, crimson flame seemed to burn her face; her eyes flashed fire, then drooped.

"Eric Chilvers!" she repeated. "Why should you envy him?"

"Because he is so happy. His face was all sunshine, his eyes all brightness. He is happy, for he has won what he loves best."

"What do you mean, Lord Brandon?" she asked, quickly.

She had turned round so that she could look directly at him. In her fierce impatience it seemed to her that she could have taken the words from his lips.

"What do you mean?" she repeated.

"Have you not heard? Now I remember, Eric told me it was only just settled. But surely you know all about it; it can be no secret, no news to you."

He was looking at her with a half-wondering air that added to her impatience. She tried to control it.

"I do not in the least understand you. I know of no

reason why your friend should be happier this morning than any other morning."

"I should have imagined that you knew all about it. I met Eric just now, and he asked me to congratulate him; he had just won Lord Arncourt's consent to his marriage with Miss de St. Lance."

Even as she looked at him the light faded from her eyes, the flush died out of her face, leaving it white, colorless, cold as the face of the dead.

"Say that again," she half-whispered.

"The news has agitated you," said Lord Brandon, looking in wonder at that white face. "Still you must have had some idea of it. Eric Chilvers is going to marry Miss de St. Lance."

She stood perfectly still—the same terrible shock would have killed some women; she clenched her hands so tightly that the thorns of the rose ran deep into the soft fingers, but she never felt the pain. Heaven and earth seemed whirling around her. Death would have been a relief to the terrible agony of that moment, but the rest and silence of death were not for her. She stood so for what seemed to her an eternity—it was but a few minutes of time.

"How long has he loved her?" she asked, in a low voice.

"Ever since the first moment he saw her, so he tells me," replied the young earl.

"When are they to be——" She paused. It seemed

to her easier to die than to say the words—"When are they to be married?"

"In the month of October," he replied. "Now have I not some reason to envy Eric?"

"No," she replied, with a strange smile; "you have none."

"I wish I could agree with you. He has won his love. I am willing to work, to serve, and to wait for my love, as Jacob did of old; but I fear me that my love will never smile on me."

She did not seem to have heard his words. She was looking, with a strange, far-off gaze in her dark eyes, at the distant trees.

"Had you really no suspicion of the state of affairs?" he continued. "Did it never strike you that Eric liked Miss de St. Lance?"

"No," she replied, slowly; "I can safely aver that I never did."

"I always fancied it, after I had once seen them together," he said. "Are you going, Miss Arncourt?"

He never forgot the strange look she gave him, the strange smile she bent upon him.

"I must go and congratulate the bride that is to be," she replied. "Belle and I were always like sisters, you know."

Without another word of apology she turned away, leaving the young earl more surprised and bewildered than he had ever been in his life before.

"What an inccmprehensible girl that is," he said to himself. "I love her, I worship the very ground she stands upon ; yet I do not believe she will ever care for me. Oh, if I knew—if I only knew how to win her."

She walked on, regardless of everything. Lord Arn-court saw her as she passed the library window, and called her name. She did not even hear him. Madame sent word that she wished to see her. She never even heard the message. Her brain and her heart were on fire. She went into the house, and her maid, who was crossing the hall, looked up in wonder at her white, wild face.

"Where is Miss St. Lance?" asked Reine ; and the answer was : "In her own room."

Slowly, and with stately steps, she went up the broad marble staircase. She rapped at the door of Belle's room.

"Come in," said a low, happy voice.

Gravely, coldly, with haughty step, Reine walked up to the young girl. She looked into the sweet face.

"We have lived like sisters," she said. "Tell me the truth ; are you going to marry Eric Chilvers?"

And Belle, bending her head that she might not meet that cold, proud glance, said, simply :

"He has asked me to do so, Reine, and my mother is willing."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"I LOVE HIM BETTER THAN MY OWN LIFE."

It was a scene that would have delighted an artist. The two girls were so beautiful, so different to each other. Belle so sweet, so shy, shrinking from her friend; yet with a face full of love and hope. Reine, like a tragic muse, stern of aspect, grave of face, the pallor of something like despair vailing its beauty. They might have been taken in that moment for the goddess of love and the goddess of revenge. It was well for Belle that she could not see the glance bent upon her.

"Your mother willing!" she said, contemptuously; "as though that had anything to do with it."

"It has everything to do with it, Reine. I should never marry without my mother's full and free consent."

An expression of angry scorn came over the beautiful face.

"It is your goodness, I suppose, that has won Eric," she said. "Do you love him, Belle?"

The fair face flushed and drooped; it was hard to own that she loved any one, when asked in such cold, hard tones.

"You need not have any affectation with me," said

Reine, impetuously ; "it does not impose upon me. I ask you a question ; surely you don't mind answering it."

"I will answer any question you choose, Reine ; but you are so cold—so cold and hard, dear."

"Am I?" was the reply, and Reine laughed a mocking, reckless laugh that was not pleasing to hear. "Do you love him, Belle ? or are you going to marry him because he will one day be Lord Arncourt's heir?"

The sweet face flushed again.

"Why do you say such a thing to me, Reine? You know that it is for himself I love him."

Reine was silent for a few minutes, then she spoke in an altered voice.

"Do you love him, Belle ?—do you really love him very much?"

No need for words ; the tender eyes, the sweet lips, the bright, warm blush, give answer sufficient. No words are needed, yet Belle speaks.

"I love him better than my own life," she says, gently ; and Reine stood for a few minutes irresolute, then with sudden energy she cried out :

"I do not believe that a girl of your cold nature knows what love is !"

"Yes," interrupted Belle, "you have known how well I love you."

"That is a different matter. Now, Belle, supposing that some one offered you even more wealth, every earthly

gift in richest profusion, to give him up, would you do it?"

She spoke very gently, and Belle did not see the fire that flashed in the dark, luminous eyes; she did not see the trembling of the proud lip, the clenching of the white hands.

"Would I?" she repeated. "Ah, Reine, you know I would not. I would rather be poor with him than be a queen."

The beautiful face grew deadly pale.

"Would you? I do not think Eric shares such sentiments. Your lover, as a rule, does not forget the main chance. You will not find him so sentimental."

But her words did not anger Belle; she looked up at Reine's face with a smile.

"You are trying to tease me, Reine," she said, "but I am too happy to be teased."

The gloom of the dark eyes deepened. Belle rose from her seat; she went up to Reine, and clasped her white arm round her neck; she laid her sweet face against the cold face that was to know light and warmth never more; she kissed the beautiful brow.

"I understand you, Reine," she said. "You are trying to seem hard and cold to me; you are pretending that you are not glad, you are wishing to make me believe that my happiness is a matter of indifference to you. Ah, Reine! you will not succeed. I know how dearly you love me; I know that in the depth of your heart you are

well pleased at my happiness. I understand my Reine, my beautiful, proud, stately sister. No one knows her better. And I understand how much love and true tenderness lies underneath that proud manner."

For one moment the touch of those warm, sweet lips softened her. She laid her hand on the gentle head.

"Poor Belle!" she murmured. "Poor, gentle Belle!"

"Why do you call me poor?" asked Belle, with a bright smile. "I am richer—at least, I think so—than any one else in the whole wide world."

Those words were quite sufficient. The gleam of tenderness died out of Reine's heart, never to shine there again. She drew back from the soft caress of those tender arms.

"How sentimental you are, Belle," she said. "Sentiment always seems to me so absurd."

Belle merely laughed. She was accustomed to Reine's changes of mood; they never troubled her, or affected the sweet, contented disposition.

"How much, after all, Reine, I owe to you! If I had not come to England with you, I should never have seen Eric."

"Eric is all the world to you now, I suppose?" said Reine, with a sneer.

But the sneer was lost on the happy girl. She thought only of the words.

"He is more than all the world, indeed," she replied.

"But, Reine, did you never suspect that he loved me? Did it never occur to you?"

"Do you suppose I interested myself to such an extent in Mr. Chilvers as to think of his probable love affairs? Had I done so, I should never have thought he was falling in love with you."

"Mamma was surprised; and, Reine, the only little cloud in my sky is this: I am afraid she does not approve of it."

"What makes you think so?" asked Reine, with sudden interest.

"She seemed so cold and so uninterested; she never even kissed me, or wished me happiness. All that she said was: 'I have nothing to say about it, child; be happy in your own way.' That was not very encouraging, was it, Reine?"

"Madame is not demonstrative," replied Reine, coldly. "I must go. So you love him, Belle, with all your heart? Say the words over again."

"I do love him, with all my heart," repeated Belle; and then Reine, without another word, swept away.

She did not know how to meet him. The bell would soon ring for lunch, and then she must be herself, or he would know how the news affected her.

He should never have that triumph, she said to herself—never! He should not know that he had had power to drive the color from her face, the light from her eyes, and all trace of happiness from her heart. He should

not know that life had lost all its charm for her ; that the news of his love for and his marriage with another had power almost to take the life from her—he should never know it.

She went to her room, and called her maid.

“I am looking ill this morning,” she said ; “you must make me look as well as you can.”

The maid, who rejoiced in the name of Mary Pinthorn, promised to do her best, and it was soon accomplished.

There was a faint touch of something, that gave the most delicate and exquisite bloom to the fair face ; there was a bright line drawn under the eyes, that changed their haggard expression into one of dreamy splendor. It was wonderful to see the white lips in that exquisitely colored face.

“You must do something here,” said Reine, impatiently, touching them with her fingers. “I cannot go down stairs with lips like these.”

There was another touch, magical in its effect, and then the lips were red as any rose.

“Now, be careful with my dress,” said Reine. “I want to look as nice as I can.”

A dress of shining white material threw a gleam over her, and Pinthorn, anxious to please, asked :

“Shall I bring you some blush roses to-day, miss?”

She had asked the question simply thinking that her young lady preferred them to any other flowers ; she was

not prepared for the effect. Reine looked around quickly, with a flushed face.

"Do not mention them to me again," she cried. "I detest them. I will never wear them again."

"Well, there is no accounting for caprice," said the maid to herself; and in that she was right.

Reine was satisfied at last; she seemed by magic to have recovered her brilliant bloom, her exquisite coloring. There was no pallor, no white ghastly despair in the beautiful face upon which she gazed.

"He will not think that I am dying for love of him," she said to herself. "I shall conquer yet. They shall never know what I have suffered."

So Reine, radiant and beautiful as ever, came out from her room. She met Belle, and smiled in the girl's sweet face.

"There is one question more I wished to ask you," she said. "When are you going to be married?"

"In October, I think, Reine; but the time is not arranged yet. It will be then, I think."

"There is time for much to happen before October," thought Reine. "Time does wonders; it may befriend me."

CHAPTER XL.

"I MUST BE GENEROUS TO FORGIVE THAT."

Eric had felt some little dread of meeting Reine.

"I cannot bear to meet that pained look in her beautiful face," he thought. "There never was anything so unfortunate in this world. If she had only taken a fancy to Brandon, how happy we might all have been!"

The bell rang for luncheon at last, and he knew they must meet. He had done nothing wrong, but he shrank like a coward from seeing her.

It was a relief greater than he could describe to find her in the dining-room, looking more brilliant, more beautiful than ever. She was talking gayly to Lord Brandon, and Eric's heart rose at the sight.

"Could I be mistaken?" he thought. "It is not possible that she could love me and yet be so happy. I must have been mistaken."

Yet he felt sure there had been no mistake.

"She intends me to forget all about it," he thought again; "and I shall only be too glad."

She did not appear to notice him when he entered the room. She went on, laughing and talking, incoherently enough, if the truth be known, but no one knew how her

heart beat and her brain whirled. Outwardly she was calm enough.

"I have been so anxious over you," Lord Brandon was saying, "and now I blame myself for it."

"Why were you anxious?" she asked, laughingly.

"Because I thought you looked so ill ; but I do not know that I ever saw you more brilliant—I dare not say beautiful ; you would be cross with me."

"Certainly I should."

Then she took her place at the table, and Lord Brandon, more enchanted than ever, followed her. Then, for the first time she appeared to see Eric. She smiled at him in the most careless and unconcerned fashion.

"I am right about the weather," she said, gayly. "You thought it would rain ; I knew it would not. You are wrong, and I am right."

"You are always right," said Lord Brandon, with a bow ; and, to his astonishment, she found no fault with the compliment.

After luncheon was over they went out, each intent on his or her particular amusement. Eric was talking to Lord Arncourt, and Reine went up to him.

"I am behind the rest of the world with my congratulations," she said ; "let me offer them now."

It was Eric who looked confused, not Reine.

"You are very kind," he said ; and Lord Arncourt, thinking they might speak more at their ease in his absence, went away.

"Thank Heaven," said the master of Neversleigh, "for one thing; my plans have harmed no one. Reine does not care for him, and I was sorely afraid she did."

"You are very kind," repeated Eric.

She laughed carelessly.

"Yes, I think myself that I am very good-natured, considering how completely you had kept me in the dark. You had quite ignored me. I must be generous to forgive that."

"I am only surprised that it should be so," said Eric, simply. "I thought every one *must* see how dearly I loved Belle."

"You need not give me a lover's rhapsody," she said, impatiently. "I never saw any particular sign of love either with you or Belle; that, of course, is not my business. Like all the rest of the world, I wish you happiness, Eric, and have no doubt but that in a few years you will play a very respectable Darby to Belle's Joan. Now let us talk sense, and forget love."

"Love is sense," replied Eric, with a smile—he was so entirely relieved to find that she took it so quietly. He did not know *quite* what he had feared; she was far too proud for any complaints, for any murmurs—too proud even to let her love be guessed at. What, then, was there to fear? He did not know; the only thing he felt sure of was that it was an indescribable relief to find her so seemingly free from care.

"Yet, last night," he thought to himself, "she looked

so ghastly, so despairing ; surely I cannot have dreamed it all."

He watched her during the day, for it seemed to him that his senses must have deceived him. As though she had guessed that he would do so, she played her part to perfection. She was the graceful mistress of the gay revels. She talked to others of the engagement and marriage that was to be. *The gossip, par excellence*, Miss Braderniss, came to her with a face full of wonder.

"Dear Miss Arncourt, is this story about the marriage true?" she asked. "Mr. Chilvers and Miss de St. Lance, I mean?"

"Perfectly true," replied Reine, whose well-tutored face betrayed no surprise.

"I am so astonished. Do you know that I—all of us, in fact—thought it was to you that Mr. Chilvers was engaged."

She bore it, and smiled. The words smote her heart with the most terrible pain, but she gave no sign.

"You, and all of you," she repeated, mimicking Miss Braderniss' accent, "were mistaken, you see."

"Still it would have been *very* appropriate—Lord Arncourt's daughter and his heir. You would not have been obliged to change your name. Besides, to my mind, you are so much more beautiful than Miss de St. Lance, I cannot think how it was he did not fall in love with you."

Reine raised her head proudly. It was one thing to hear

such matters lightly discussed, and another to ponder them in her own heart.

"I do not see that you have any right to discuss the question," she replied, haughtily. "Mr. Chilvers and Miss de St. Lance have pleased themselves ; I shall do the same. There need be no comment upon it."

"Oh, no—certainly not," replied the obsequious gossip. "At the same time, it does seem strange, does it not?"

"*What* seems strange?" asked Reine, impatiently. It was torture to her to hear this girl discuss that which to herself she could hardly admit. "What seems strange?"

"That Mr. Chilvers should not have liked you best. We *all* thought he did."

"That merely shows you are *all* wanting in penetration. Pray, Miss Braderniss, do not let us discuss the matter ; it does not interest me."

She knew the sharp, shrewd eyes were fixed upon her face ; she knew that the insatiable gossip would be only too delighted to note any change there, and to tell afterward how "poor dear Miss Arncourt" looked. No one should have that triumph over her.

"To tell the truth," she continued, laughingly, "I am glad we are going to have a wedding. I have not seen a regular English wedding yet. But pray do not tell any one I said that, Miss Braderniss ; people will think I am so childish."

She knew perfectly well that the lady gossip would re-

peat to a circle of admiring friends how glad Miss Arncourt was—the very impression she wished to go abroad, and she had taken the surest method of spreading it.

All that day, though each hour seemed to her an age, she was brilliant, gay and beautiful; she was the life of the whole party. Each hour Eric wondered more and more, while Lord Brandon fell more deeply and hopelessly in love.

But when the night came she was exhausted; the strain upon her nerves had been too great; she had overtaxed her strength. Alone in her own room the mask she had worn fell from her, even as the rouge washed from her face.

“How long is it to last, and how am I to bear it?” she asked herself. “Could I spend years in such a manner? Could I pass my whole life so?”

“No,” was the answer of her own heart.

The time would soon come when she would tire of playing a part; when the passionate nature and despairing love would rise in hot rebellion; and what—she asked herself—is despair—what was to become of her then?

She did not know. Suddenly her own words recurred to her: “Much might happen before October!”

She repeated the words over and over again. She had no particular meaning ascribed to them in her own mind.

“*Much* might happen,” but she did not say to herself what the meaning might comprise; accident, sickness, sorrow, death.

"Men have changed their minds before now," she said, "in less time than that—and women, too. Eric may prove faithless; Belle may change; a thousand things may happen. They are not married yet."

And that was the first whispering of the evil spirit to her, the first temptation.

The same evening Lord Arncourt found himself by the side of Madame de St. Lance. She was looking pale and anxious.

"I have hardly found time to offer my congratulations yet, madame," he said; "they are very sincere ones. Your daughter will be a happy girl."

"I hope so," replied madame, in a low voice; "but I took your side of the question, Lord Arncourt. I would far rather that he had married Reine."

"Why?" asked my lord.

And the strangeness of her reply did not strike him until long afterward.

"Because—Reine—loved him, I believe."

"Nay," replied Lord Arncourt, gently; "it is not so. I found that we were both mistaken. Reine was and is perfectly indifferent; I have ample proof of that."

CHAPTER XLI.

"COULD YOU EVER HAVE LOVED ME?"

A beautiful autumn evening, and the whole household in Neversleigh are on the lawn to enjoy its brightness; it is neither daylight nor moonlight, but the warm fragrant gloaming lies over the land; the flowers are asleep, the birds are silent, the stately swans have found their nests, the stars are beginning to appear; the air is so balmy, so sweet, so full of rich odors, that it was impossible to rest indoors while it invited one out.

Lord Brandon had left Neversleigh. He had made Miss Arncourt another offer, and she had refused him; not laughingly this time—her eyes seemed open to the pain of rejected love—but with kindly words and kindly looks.

He had taken fresh hopes from that which was in reality a sign how hopeless his love must be. Miss Braderniss, and, in fact, the whole relay of visitors had left, and they were not expecting a fresh party. Madame had expressed a wish that there should be at least two days between the going of one party and the coming of another. Reine objected. There was nothing she dreaded so much as be-

ing left alone to the torture of her own thoughts ; but Lord Arncourt was of madame's opinions.

"Fresh visitors require fresh arrangements ; it is better to comply with madame's wish, Reine."

Reine yielded with the same indifferent grace she displayed now over everything ; nothing interested her deeply, or interested her long.

"I must endure it," she thought ; "I shall have to look on while Eric goes in raptures, and Belle looks sedate. I hate them ; but the end is not here yet—much may happen before October."

On this evening madame, Belle, Reine, Lord Arncourt, and Eric, were all on the lawn together. For the first time the conversation turned upon the wedding that was to take place in October.

Lord Arncourt was beginning to recover from his disappointment. After all, Reine, with her brilliant beauty, would do far better, perhaps, than by marrying his heir.

Then Eric was so happy, and Belle so beautiful in her love, he could not keep up any show of reserve about the matter. Reine evidently was perfectly indifferent. And on this beautiful evening, when the world was all fair and smiling, Lord Arncourt felt more cheerful than usual, and, longing to make others happy, began to talk about the wedding.

"We shall not have much time for preparation," he said. "Belle, you must be married in a style befitting my

own daughter. You will, of course, be married here. This is your home."

"You are very kind, Lord Arncourt," replied the girl. "There is one favor I should like to ask over my—my marriage."

He looked admiringly at her sweet, gentle face.

"What is it?" he replied. "If it is in my power it is granted before you ask."

"It is that Reine shall be my bride-maid. I do not want any others. But we have been sisters all our lives."

"You must ask Reine herself. She is sure to say 'yes,'" he replied.

Belle looked at Reine. She affected not to have heard one word, but was watching the light deepen on the lake.

"Ask her, Eric," said Belle.

And with every one looking at him he was obliged, against his own will, to comply.

She listened to him quietly, she looked up at him steadily. Her heart was beating with a pain that knew no limit. The sting of jealousy almost maddened her.

"Belle wishes me to be her bride-maid," she repeated; "it is only natural. I can have no objection. We are sisters, you know."

Though the proud lips never trembled, and the beautiful face remained the same, there was something in the tone of her voice that filled his heart with vague, unreasoning fear. They discussed some details of the marriage;

then Reine, driven to the extremity of pain, rose suddenly from her seat.

"I see some glow-worms," she said, "I must go and watch them."

She was so capricious, so changeable, so variable, that none of them thought it strange. She went away, and the conversation between the others was resumed.

Then, for the first time, Lord Arncourt spoke of the handsome dowry that he intended to give Belle. She kissed his hand, raising her sweet face to his, and telling him how grateful she was for all his kindness. Madame was the first to fancy that the night was growing chill; she went in, and after a few minutes Belle followed her. Then Lord Arncourt felt inclined for a cigar.

"Where is Reine?" he asked, suddenly.

"She has wandered after the glow-worms."

"Eric, tell her it is growing late."

He went down the long alley where he had seen the flutter of her dress, but she was not there.

"Reine!" he called, but there was no reply. He saw the gate open that led to the fernery, and passed through it.

She was sitting out in the starlight among the ferns, and one glance at her face showed him how bitterly she had been weeping. He would not notice it.

She asked him to sit down for a few minutes.

"I like this old fernery by moonlight," she said. "Oh,

Eric ! when this fair home is yours and no longer mine, will you let me visit these old nooks and corners ?”

“It will always be your home, Reine ; nothing can prevent that,” he replied.

She shook her head sadly.

“It will not be mine,” she said, “when you bring a wife here to rule as mistress.”

“My dear Reine ! As though Belle could have any interest apart from yours ; your home would always be hers, and her home would always be yours. Is it not so ?”

She made him no answer ; she was looking intently at the pale light on the ferns.

“I never thought, when we both came home here, that Belle would, some future day, be Lady Arncourt.”

“I cannot say the same thing,” he replied, laughingly. “I fell in love at once.”

“That is strange, too. I do not understand those sudden loves and sudden hates.”

“If ever you love yourself, it will be after the same fashion,” he said.

“Eric,” she cried, “we have always been good friends ; will you answer me one question ?”

“I will answer just as many as you choose to ask.”

“You say you loved Belle at first sight ; now, remember, I am only asking out of curiosity, if you had never seen her at all, do you think you could ever have loved *me* ?”

He was too much astonished for a few minutes to make any reply. Her dark eyes were fixed on his face.

"Remember," she said, "it is only from curiosity that I ask; should you ever have fallen in love with me if you had not seen Belle? Look at me frankly—answer me frankly."

He did look at her; her beautiful face was quite calm.

"It is such a strange question, Reine," he replied.

"Never mind about its being strange. What I can ask, surely you can answer. Tell me—I repeat it—if you had never seen Belle, would you have loved me?"

He looked at her steadily, critically, calmly.

"You are very beautiful," he replied; "very graceful, winning, and charming; next to Belle, I like you better than any one else in the world. Yes, I think—I believe that if I had never seen her, I should have fallen in love with you."

"That is frankly answered," she said; and from the calm face, the calm, gentle voice, he could not tell whether she was pleased or not.

"We will go in now," she said, gently. "I do not know that I have ever seen so many glow-worms; how pretty they are, in the green leaves. Papa is smoking—even at this distance I can detect the odor of his cigar."

CHAPTER XLII.

A LIFE OF TORTURE.

It was a life of *torture* that commenced now for Reine Arncourt. Day by day her love for the man who preferred another increased; it seemed to feed on what should have starved it.

All restraint on the young lovers was now removed. They spoke openly of their approaching marriage; their plans and arrangements were freely discussed. Every one seemed interested in them. Eric was so popular; Belle so dearly loved. They seemed to have an atmosphere of happiness and brightness always about them; and Reine's love, Reine's despair, became greater as she witnessed it.

The Spartan boy was nothing to her; she bore far greater pains, and concealed them so adroitly that no one ever knew of them.

There were times when she smiled and talked while her heart seemed breaking *for* even as there is no fury like a woman scorned, so there is no anguish like that of unrequited, unacknowledged love. There can be no rest, no peace, no calm, no serenity, no hope, no hap-

piness, where the soul is given up to the empire of so mighty a passion. 7

Their love was so innocent, so graceful, so like a beautiful poem read aloud, madame's face relaxed as she watched them ; it seemed to lose its sternness and its fear.

Lord Arncourt enjoyed being with them ; the very sight of their happiness made him young again.

They were privileged beings, too, these happy lovers ; they were allowed long walks in the gloaming, they were allowed rambles in the woods, and no one questioned them as to where they had been.

Unhappy Reine would see them leave the house. She would watch the light on Eric's face, the quiet, shy happiness, the deep, tender love in Belle's eyes, and her heart would grow warm with anger, her soul rise in hot rebellion against her fate.

Then, to make matters worse, Lord Arncourt sent for her one day, to consult her as to what his wedding present to Belle should be. It was something to stand there, with jealous love burning her very heart away, and talk over what Belle liked best. It was terrible torture to her, but she bore it with a heroism worthy of a better cause.

They discussed the matter fully. Lord Arncourt wished to make them a magnificent present.

"Under any circumstances I should have given Eric something worth having ; as it is, I wish him particularly to feel that I am pleased."

"How, papa? I do not quite understand you."

Lord Arncourt laughed.

"You see, Reine, I had other plans for him, and he knows it. I want him to understand that I do not feel in the least hurt or annoyed that he did not carry them out."

"What plans were they, papa?"

Now Lord Arncourt was accustomed to obey Reine. She had by far the stronger will of the two. In this particular instance he would far rather *not* have answered her; but the habit of obedience was strong upon him.

"Plans, my dear, respecting *you*. I thought it would be such an excellent thing if my daughter and my heir could marry."

Her face never lost its color, nor her eyes their steady calm, as she looked at him.

"I could have told you that was an absurd plan, papa; it could not possibly answer."

Looking at her calm face, Lord Arncourt believed her most implicitly.

"It is useless to direct Cupid's arrows," he said, laughingly. "It is better, without doubt, as it is. But what of this service of plate and these jewels, Reine? Suppose that we for once commit a great extravagance—I will give the plate, and you the jewels."

Calmly, as though the deep rest and peace of her heart were centered in each word, she discussed the matter with him. He knew nothing of the storm that raged within,

or the tempest that seemed to overwhelm her, of the shock of pain that every word of his caused her.

She listened to the end, when Lord Arncourt leaned back in his chair, with a contented smile.

"They will be very happy, Reine, will they not? And when they are once married I shall hope to see madame looking gayer and brighter than she has done of late."

To which Reine made no reply. Madame's looks were of no consequence now to her.

"I almost wish," continued Lord Arncourt, "that Eric would consent to make Neversleigh his home. I think I shall ask him to do so."

She raised her eyes calmly to his.

"Live here with his wife after they are married, do you mean?"

"Yes," replied Lord Arncourt; "I think it would be more pleasant and lively for us all. I shall speak to him about it to-day. Now, Reine, I thank you for your patient attention, and you may go, my dear. The steward is here, and I shall be engaged busily for the next two or three hours."

She went away, rage in her heart, envy, hate, jealousy in her soul, longing to be freed from the restraint of all human presence, where she could give full and free vent to the angry passions that surged over her as rolling seas over the shore.

"How am I to bear it?" she asked herself. Then a

shadow came between her and the sunshine. Looking up, she saw the sweet, serene-looking face of Belle.

"Reine, I was looking for you, darling. Will you come into my room? Those patterns of silk have arrived, and I want you to help me choose."

Reine knew that the silks had been sent for. An angry flush rose to her face.

"I am no judge of silk," she said. "Consult some one who has more taste."

"That would be impossible," replied Belle, laughingly. "You may be, as you say, Reine, no judge of silk; but you can judge of what will look best for your little sister on her wedding-day."

And Belle's sweet face flushed. She stole one arm round Reine's neck.

"You will not mind helping me to choose that, will you, Reine?"

She would have resisted, she would have turned round with some sharp, angry word, but the touch of that gentle arm restrained her.

"I shall not be of much use," she said, ungraciously; "but I will come if it pleases you."

She went, and to her surprise found a little committee of taste assembled in Belle's pretty room. Eric stood looking with a most amused smile at the glittering piles of silk. Madame's face wore a grave and almost anxious expression. She held in her hand a costly fabric—white brocade, with satin flowers.

She looked up anxiously as the two girls entered the room, her face cleared, as it always did, at the sight of Reine.

"I am glad you have come, Reine," she said. "We want the benefit of your taste. I prefer this to the others. What do you think?"

She bent her face over the rich brocade, so as to hide its burning blushes from Eric. She was surprised to see him there.

"This reminds me of a picture I have seen somewhere," he said, "called 'Choosing a Wedding Dress.' What do you think of all this splendor, Reine?"

She could not have spoken to him had it been to save her life. Her whole heart was filled with the misery of her unhappy love and rage against him. She made some remark to madame, who looked at Belle with a complacent smile.

"She would look very nice in this brocade; it would suit her better than silk; do you not think so, Eric?"

"I think she would look beautiful in ~~any~~ dress," he replied. As though the thought of Belle in her wedding-dress was an ecstatic idea, he bent down and kissed her; kissed the sweet, blushing face, the white eyelids, the fresh, ripe lips.

"I beg your pardon, Bellé," he said, laughingly; "I could not help it. The very thought of you in your wedding-dress bewildered me."

They turned round suddenly at the sound of a closing door. Reine had disappeared.

"She has not told me what she thinks," said madame ;
"but Reine never did take sufficient interest in dress."

They thought no more of her ; they knew nothing of the terrible storm that that gentle, half-laughing caress had aroused in her. She went out from them like one possessed ; she went to her own room and took a black lace mantilla from the wardrobe ; she folded it round her so that any one meeting her might think she was going out for a stroll ; then she hastened out into the grounds.

"I should die if I stayed in the house," she cried. "I must go where there is perfect freedom."

She hurried through the pleasure-grounds, through the coppice, and into the woods. No human being was near, but the birds were soon startled by the passionate cries of a broken heart, cries that fell freely and clearly on the soft, sweet air, and seemed to rise to the very face of the blue heavens—bitter, passionate cries, that took with them the burden of a most unhappy soul.

"I cannot bear it," she said to herself. "I cannot bear it any longer. I have borne as much as I could."

She lay sobbing on the ground, where she had flung herself in the frenzy of her grief.

What strange thought had come to her in the green leafy solitude? What strange idea? For suddenly she clasped her white hands, and raised them to heaven.

"Not that!" she cried. "I am not wicked enough for that."

But after a time she grew silent, the passionate cries, the bitter sobs died away—the idea had taken possession of her.

CHAPTER XLIII.

"I WISH SHE WERE DEAD."

Reine could not bear it. Had she been wise, prudent, or sensible, she would have told her father all and would have asked him to take her away; but her pride was too great for that. She preferred any torture rather than that any human being should know that the flattered and beautiful Reine Arncourt, who had so many lovers at her feet, loved in vain—had given her heart to one who did not in the least value her gift; to one who would not accept it, but was on the point of marrying some one else. She would rather have killed herself than have it known. More than once the temptation to take her own life had been almost too strong for her.

But then she had thought of what would follow her death. A few months' mourning, and then she would be forgotten. They would benefit, not lose by her death. There would be no one then to share with them the great inheritance—her death would simply enrich them.

"Besides," she said to herself, "I should know no rest; I could not even sleep in my grave if they were living, loving, happy."

No, death would never serve her purpose—it would not cause them to suffer.

Then a violent, unreasoning hatred of Belle came over her. But for her—this alien to her name and her race, this stranger who was simply there through her father's mistaken kindness—but for her this would not have happened.

"I might have been happy," she thought. "He would have loved me—he said so himself—he would have loved me if he had never seen her. I ought to hate her. I do hate her. She comes here to my father's house a stranger, and she wins from me the prize I would give my life to possess. She is nothing to us; she has no claim upon us. It is only by my father's mistaken kindness that she is here. Yet she might have taken the whole of the fortune, the estate, the inheritance—she might have taken all I had if she would only have left me Eric."

She hated her with a fierce, virulent hatred as time wore on, and the frenzy of her jealous love, her jealous madness increased.

She would have done any injury to her rival that lay in her power; she would gladly have seen her dead—she wished her dead.

"I wish she were dead," was a constantly recurring phrase.

She had come to that pass where there is no more hope of peace or calm, where ideas of right and wrong become confused, where she lost all thought of goodness, of self-

control, of virtue. She forgot all about rewards and punishment, the anger of God, the vengeance on sin. She thought of nothing except that she loved Eric with all the strength and fervor of her despairing soul, and that she hated Belle with the same intensity.

She might have been happy. This one great gift for which she craved was not given her, but all other things were. She had riches, wealth, honor, position, rank, and beauty. She might have been most happy, but that she yielded heart and soul to a master passion. She might have been content with the good things that yet remained to her, but between herself and content there was a deep, impassable gulf.

She tried, before others, to control this violent hate; but her silence, the sullen gloom on her beautiful face whenever she found herself with the object of her hatred, told her secret.

Belle at first thought she must be mistaken, then she feared that by some inadvertent word she had offended Reine; finally, she wondered and grieved until wondering seemed useless. Then, one morning, finding Reine alone in the drawing-room, she went to her, and bent caressingly over her.

"Reine," she said, gently, "have I been so unfortunate as to displease you?"

Coldness and gloom seemed to fall like a vail over that beautiful face.

"I have said nothing of the kind," she replied, haughtily.

"No, my darling, you have not said it ; but you have looked it, Reine. You look so angrily at me ; you seem as though my very presence and the sound of my voice were displeasing to you ; yet how can it—how can it be ?"

Tears fell from the gentle eyes, and the sweet lips, quivering like the lips of a grieved child, would have moved any one less proud and cold than Reine.

"I do not see any need of this ridiculous scene, Belle. What do you want? What do you expect? I cannot go into raptures over you. You have raptures enough?"

"But you seem so unlike yourself," said the poor, perplexed girl. "I cannot understand you at all."

"Then do not try. It seems to me of very little consequence whether you understand me or not."

"But, Reine, we have always been like sisters," cried Belle ; and her sorrowful eyes seemed to plead for a renewal of the old love.

"You have new claims upon your affection, so have I," was the cold reply.

Belle looked sadly at her.

"Reine," she said at last, slowly, "does my *marriage* displease you?"

All the pride and fire of her nature seemed to flash in her face, her eyes rained scorn, her lips curled in direct contempt.

"Your marriage!" she repeated, haughtily; "what has that to do with me? Do you suppose every one in the world thinks so much of that nonsense as you do yourself?"

"No," replied Belle, humbly; "I do not think so. But you, my sister, surely you take some interest in my welfare?"

"Very few people interest me," she said.

Then, seeing the pained expression in the young girl's face, she hastened to add:

"Do not get ridiculous ideas into your mind, Belle. The time has long passed when we shared each other's thoughts and cares. I have many that you could not even understand. Pray confine your attentions to Eric and your wedding; do not let them wander to me again. I do not like being teased."

"Ah, Reine, you will never love me as in the old days," said Belle, with a deep sigh.

Then, seeing that her presence only annoyed and irritated Reine, Belle went away.

It was well for her peace of mind that she did not see the glance that followed her. The hatred, the vengeance, the cruelty of it would surely have startled her—might, perhaps, have warned her.

"Baby face, baby manners, baby ways," murmured Reine; "and yet in the race she has beaten me."

From that moment it seemed as though her hatred increased. She hated the unoffending girl with a fierce-

ness not to be told in words. Eric must have remarked it, but that just then he was often absent from Neversleigh.

Madame seemed engrossed in her own bitter thoughts ; but Lord Arncourt could not help seeing that Reine was changed toward Belle.

"My dear Reine," he said to her one morning, nervously, "has there been any little coolness between yourself and Miss de St. Lance?"

"Not that I am aware of, papa," was the careless reply.

"I fancied that I had perceived something of the kind. I am glad it is not the case. I suppose the very best of friends have little coldnesses ; but Belle and you should always be like sisters."

"You all seem to be in a conspiracy for worshipping Belle," said Reine, impatiently. "Worship as much as you please, but, remember, papa, I am not one of the adoring class at all."

Lord Arncourt was somewhat awed by his daughter's imperious manner.

"I merely mentioned it, my dear ; it was quite a fancy of my own."

"I had no idea how completely a stranger could keep the daughter of the house in the background," she said, with a smile that was not pleasant to see. "You are so anxious to worship Belle, I am forgotten."

Lord Arncourt looked up quickly. It was a relief to him to see that she was smiling, even though he thought the expression strange.

"My dear Reine ! you are not surely jealous ?" he cried.

"No, indeed, I am not !" she interrupted, and then Lord Arncourt smiled again to himself.

"She is vexed," he thought, "because Belle is to be married first. All young girls are slightly jealous of each other, I suppose."

It was unfortunate that he did not look for a deeper cause than mere girlish jealousy. Much harm might have been prevented had he been a shrewder man.

"I could not hate her more," thought Reine, as she pondered over her father's words, "but she shall not poison my life. She has broken my heart, but she shall do no more."

September, with its harvests of golden grain, its beautiful autumn foliage, had come at last, and the next month they were to be married.

"Only six weeks more, and I shall call this little hand mine," said Eric, as he sat, one evening, by Belle's side. Reine was near them.

"I am always frightened," she said, "when I hear you speak so confidently."

"Are you, darling ? Why should you be ? What can part us now ?"

"Sickness or death," she replied, simply.

Reine looked up, with a quick, furtive glance. Eric laughed.

"My dear, dismal prophetess ! This time two months

you will be laughing to think how all your forebodings were vain."

And Reine turned aside, lest he should see her face, and read a *secret* there.

CHAPTER XLIV.

"IT WILL NEVER BE."

Eric had been to London for a week. He was busily engaged in making purchases and arranging for his wedding tour. His occupation delighted him, although he felt annoyed at every duty and every movement that kept him away from Belle.

He returned one bright, sunny afternoon, the second week in September. He had met Lord Arncourt out riding, and had hastily inquired if all were well at home.

"All except Belle," replied Lord Arncourt ; "she has not been well for the last few days."

"She did not tell me so when she wrote," replied the young lover. "She has written to me every day, but she did not tell me of ill-health."

"She did not like to make you anxious," said Lord Arncourt. "There is nothing much the matter. Madame told me she had fainted, and yesterday I thought her very ill ; to-day they tell me she is better. In all probability the poor child is anxious ; she will be better soon."

"I hope to Heaven she will," replied Eric. "You will excuse me, my lord, I am sure, if I hurry on."

Lord Arncourt felt so perfectly at ease himself that he only smiled at the young lover's eagerness.

"Ah, youth! happy, eager youth!" he murmured, as the quick, ringing gallop of the horse fell upon his ear. "What would I give to be young and ardent once more!"

Eric rode on, the prey of a thousand wild thoughts. His darling was ill, and had not told him!—ill, and he was away from her! With the rapidity of lightning all her dismal forebodings rushed over him. What was it she had said so short a time since? "Sickness or death!" Ah! surely Heaven was too merciful for that; his darling would never be taken from him. Surely there was mercy in those bright blue skies. Then he laughed aloud. How foolish he was! If there had been need or cause for anxiety, surely Lord Arncourt would have told him so. But he had smiled; he would not have smiled had Belle been in danger.

He galloped on. At the lodge gate he stopped, and when the keeper came out, he said:

"Are they all well at the Abbey?"

The man touched his hat.

"All quite well, I believe, sir."

"Thank Heaven! There could not be anything seriously wrong, or all the servants must have heard of it."

Yet it seemed to him an age before he stood in the entrance hall of Neversleigh. Then his first question was:

"Where shall I find Miss de St. Lance?"

Her maid was hastily summoned.

"My mistress has been ill," she said, with a courtesy, "but she is better this afternoon. She is in the drawing-room."

"She expected me, of course?" said Eric, impatiently, not wishing to startle her.

"Yes, sir. But for that, I do not think Miss de St. Lance would have left her room."

And Eric, without another word, hastened to the drawing-room.

Long afterward he remembered how the sunshine lay slanting on the hall floor, how the flowers seemed to breathe perfume. Then he opened the door. When was he to forget the sight? The sun shone full and bright into the room, and its light seemed centered on the white face of gentle Belle.

A couch had been drawn near the window, and she lay on it. The sunshine, falling on her colorless face, showed him how great was the change there—so changed, so white, so wan, that he shrank back, startled, shocked, frightened.

She saw him then, and a low cry came from her lips.

"Eric!" she said, and the next moment he was kneeling by her side—he had clasped her in his arms—he was covering her with kisses.

"My darling Belle, you have been ill, and never told me. If I had known, I should have returned before this."

"I did not want to cause you anxiety," she said. "I am better now."

"Better, with that face! Why, my darling, what has been the matter, to change you so suddenly?"

"Am I so changed?" she asked, faintly. "Oh, Eric, I am sore, sore afraid."

"Afraid of what, Belle? Tell me."

"I have felt so strangely ill; and then, you know, all my nervous fears and forebodings come over me so strongly. Oh, Eric, Eric, my love, do you think I shall have to leave you, after all?"

He controlled the dreadful fear that overcame him, as he would have done anything else for her sweet sake.

"Leave me! No, my darling. You are over-anxious, and it has made you ill."

"I am not anxious, do believe me, Eric. Why should I be? But I feel strangely unlike myself. Why do you call me changed?"

"Because you have lost your beautiful color," he replied; "but we will soon have it back."

The more he looked at her the more shocked he became at that terrible change. Her face in that one week had grown thin, pale, and wan, with a terrible haggard expression, as one who had suffered great pain. Her eyes looked larger and brighter, but the light in them was of fever, not health. The lips were burning, and the little hand he held in his own burned, too.

"How long have you been ill, Belle?" he asked.

"Ever since you went away. And oh, Eric, I have been so frightened—it seemed to me that I should never get well. The very evening after you went away I was taken ill with such a faint, terrible, cold, shivering fit, my eyes burned, and my throat burned. I never seem to have recovered from that faintness."

"What did madame say?" he inquired.

"She is like you ; she thinks I am anxious. Oh ! Eric, do not think I am foolish. I feel so safe, now that you are here again, I could lay my head on your heart, and sleep forever."

"Have you seen a doctor, Belle?" he asked.

"No ; I did not like. I have fought against my illness hour by hour. It seems to me that if I am obliged to have a doctor, I shall be really ill. I do not want to give in yet."

"I shall insist upon it ; I shall ride over to Neverstay, and fetch Dr. Grant myself. You will not oppose me, Belle?"

"No," she replied ; "I will do just as you wish."

He knelt down by her side, talking to her, trying to cheer her, and he could not help noticing how she suffered from continual burning thirst.

"You should have some ice, Belle," he said.

"I have had some ; but nothing really quenches my thirst, Eric ; my throat always burns."

She seemed so weak, so ill, so unlike herself, that Eric was distressed ; still he tried his best to soothe her, to

cheer her ; he told her of all he had been doing in London ; what preparations he had made for their wedding tour. He stopped abruptly, for she clasped her arms round his neck, and buried her face on his breast.

"Do not say another word, Eric !" she cried, with a passionate burst of tears. "I cannot bear to listen to you, for it will never be, my darling—never, in this wide world. I shall have to die, and leave you."

He called for madame, and madame came. They stood side by side near the girl's couch, looking down on her colorless face. A faint hectic flush was beginning to come in it.

"I think, madame," said Eric, sternly, "you might have told me about this."

"Belle was not willing," she said. "I wanted to write some days ago."

"I am going to Neverstay at once. I insist upon having a doctor called in. I cannot understand such neglect."

"No one has neglected me," said Belle, gently ; "every one has been most kind to me ; but I dreaded seeing a doctor, lest he should confirm my fears, and say that I was seriously ill."

But Eric was resolved that no time should be lost, and he went for Dr. Grant at once.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE MIDNIGHT SURPRISE.

Two hours later, and Dr. Grant stood by Belle's couch. He was a clever, shrewd man, well up in his profession, fond of adopting the latest improvements, quick to understand, but Belle's case puzzled him. Madame, who stood by, wondered at his questions.

"Are any of your family consumptive, madame?" he asked first.

None that madame knew of; she had never heard of such a thing. The second question was :

"Has the young lady had any great trouble—any severe mental shock—anything likely to distress her?"

The answer was :

"No; on the contrary, she was exceedingly happy, and had been busily engaged in preparing for her marriage with a gentleman to whom she was exceedingly attached."

Then Dr. Grant looked slightly puzzled.

"The symptoms are really those of consumption," he said, musingly. "We must hope, after all, that rest and time may restore her."

But long after he had left her, the doctor was haunted

by a vision of that sweet face and the large, bright, questioning eyes. He was very thoughtful all that day, and he sat until late at night studying the contents of a large book.

Eric was waiting for him when he left Belle's room.

"What do you think of her?" he asked, quickly.

The doctor smiled at his eagerness.

"There is not much the matter," he replied. "A good tonic, rest, and a little cheerful society will soon set the young lady right again."

"I hope so. I thought her looking very ill. You never saw her in health, doctor. I think this is the first time you have seen her."

"It is the first time, and therefore I can hardly judge how ill she is—how her looks have changed. She had a brilliant color, I suppose, and having lost that, you think she is very ill."

"She had the fairest bloom I ever saw on any face," said Eric; "but it has all gone."

"It will soon return," said Dr. Grant. "And I assure you, as far as I can see at present, you have really no cause for anxiety—none in the world. Miss de St. Lance will soon recover."

"Thank Heaven for that! To tell the truth, I feared for her. Miss de St. Lance has been so nervous lately; she has had a presentiment of coming sickness and death, that grieved me very much whenever she spoke of it."

The doctor looked more grave.

"A presentiment of coming death? That is strange," he said, "in the midst of wedding preparations; still, it may have been nothing but nervous fear."

Evidently Dr. Grant saw no need for anxiety. Just as he left the hall, Reine passed through. She looked at the doctor with some little curiosity; he made a low bow, and, evidently impressed with the young lady's beauty, passed on.

"Eric," said Reine, "I did not know that you had returned."

She held out her white hand to him, and looked with winning cordiality in his face.

"I came home early this afternoon, Reine; but I was so very uneasy about Belle that I went at once to Never-stay for a doctor."

The slightest expression of scorn passed over her face.

"You are easily alarmed," she said. "I do not think there is much the matter with Belle."

"She is dreadfully changed," he continued, sadly.

"I have always understood that lovers had peculiar eyes," laughed Reine, "and now I believe it. I cannot see any evidence of so great a change. Was that the doctor who just passed out?"

"Yes," replied Eric. "He asked if any of Belle's family had been consumptive. Surely my darling cannot be under the shadow of that deadly disease!"

"I do not think the De St. Lances are a healthy race,"

said Reine, "if you ask my opinion ; but I never heard anything about consumption."

"Perhaps I am over anxious," said Eric, with a deep sigh.

"Lovers should be anxious," laughed Reine ; "they have no right to be anything else. Do you consider Dr. Grant clever?"

"I should imagine so. He has the reputation of being one of the cleverest men in this part of the country. Reine, you will do all you can for Belle."

"Certainly I will," she replied, with what seemed to him a singular smile. "I will do the best that lies in my power. Do not look so anxious, Eric ; she will get well."

Even Lord Arncourt looked very solicitous when he was told that Dr. Grant had called.

"We must not have our pretty bride ill. That will never do," he said. "How do you account for it, madame?"

"I cannot account for it at all," said madame. "Belle never had a day's illness in her life before. I thought her singularly strong and healthy."

The doctor's medicine came, and Belle seemed much better after she had taken it. She was well enough to walk out on the lawn, and Eric was delighted. Reine laughed at him.

"Where are all your dismal thoughts now ?" she asked, and he was only too pleased to own himself mistaken.

That same night Eric had a great surprise. The whole

household retired to rest at an early hour, and Eric, after being in his own room for some time, found himself quite unable to sleep. He remembered that he had left in the library the second volume of a book that amused him very much, and he determined to fetch it. By the great clock in the corridor he saw that it was after two.

"I must be very quiet," he thought, "or some of the servants will raise an alarm of thieves."

He carried a light in his hand, but what was his surprise to see a light under the library door; for a moment he was startled, thinking thieves must be there, but the silence proved him mistaken. He opened the door and entered the room. What was his surprise to find Reine there, seated at the table reading so busily, so deeply engrossed that she hardly heard him. She looked up with a startled cry, and Eric laughed.

"Why, Reine, what are you doing here at this hour of the night, or rather morning?"

Her face flushed burning red; she covered the book that she was reading with her handkerchief.

"I could not sleep," she said, "so I thought I would come down here."

"I am in search of a book," he said; "I could not sleep either. What are you reading, Reine?"

She looked up, evidently agitated.

"A book of my own," she replied. "I shall not show it to you."

Eric laughed, but Reine trembled like a leaf on a tree.

She rose from her seat, holding the covered book tightly in her hand.

"Good-night," she said. "And, Eric, do not mention having found me here; I should not like it."

"I will not say one word about it, Reine, trust me."

But after she had quitted the room, he stood wondering why she looked so pale, so agitated, so *frightened*. Then he laughed to himself.

"I wonder what contraband volume Miss Reine had found," he said. "She was quite alarmed lest I should see it."

He would not have smiled if he had seen the title of the book Reine carried from the library to her own room.

Once again that same night Eric was disturbed. He fancied that he heard a slight creaking of the boards in the long corridor; then he laughed at himself for being fanciful. As though any one would be prowling about there at four in the morning; it was absurd to suppose so.

Reine smiled when they met in the morning.

"You will not mention my night's adventure, Eric," she said. "I should not like papa to think that I go prowling about the house after midnight in search of something to read."

"We will keep each other's secrets," laughed Eric.

But the laughter all died from his lips when madame came down to breakfast. She brought a bad account of Belle.

"She seems much worse this morning," said madame.

"Indeed I do not know what to make of her. I am afraid the poor child is worse than we fancied. I am really uneasy, Lord Arncourt."

Lord Arncourt was all kindness, all sympathy, all consideration. What could be done? Eric looked dismayed, Reine indifferent.

"I think," she said, "that you are all alarming yourselves without cause. Belle was much better yesterday, she is not so well to-day. It is not likely that, as she is out of health, she will never vary."

But madame was not to be comforted.

"She is worse than you imagine, Reine. I should like Dr. Grant to see her."

"Of what does she complain?" asked Lord Arncourt, anxiously.

"Of strangely contradictory symptoms," replied madame; "of burning thirst, of a tightening of the throat, faintness that is so bad it almost resembles death."

"Is it low fever?" asked Lord Arncourt.

"I have not had much experience in sickness," said madame; "but I cannot imagine low fever to be anything like this."

"I will go for Dr. Grant at once," cried Eric, and he rose from the breakfast-table.

No one opposed him. Madame looked miserable, Reine only smiled and nodded her head.

"You will laugh yourself in a few days' time, Eric, to think how you went rushing all over the country in search

of doctors," she said. "You all look so wretched. Madame has a fashion of looking at the dark side of every thing."

But Eric did not even wait to hear the few last words; he hurried away, and left them to finish breakfast alone.

He was not long in galloping over to Neverstay.

"You must come at once, doctor," he said. "Miss de St. Lance is very ill, and I am very anxious."



CHAPTER XLVI.

"WHO CAN BE GUILTY OF SUCH CRUELTY?"

Once more Dr. Grant stood by Belle's side, holding the burning hand in his, and looking pitifully in the white face. Her eyes were fixed on him, so large, so bright, so full of pitiful questioning.

"You must tell me the truth, doctor," she said, faintly ; "do not think it will frighten me. Am I going to die?"

He looked very gravely at her.

"Why do you ask me?" he said.

"Because I feel so ill ; not only ill, but strange. It can only be the shadow of death that is on me, and for many long weeks I have felt that I was going to die. You will tell me the truth?"

"I would if I knew it," he replied ; "but my knowledge is but limited. I cannot say whether you are going to die—I hope not ; but I can say this, that you are certainly very ill."

Eric felt slightly puzzled when, after a time, the doctor asked for a private interview with him.

"Pardon my abrupt speaking," said Dr. Grant, when the two found themselves in the library together ; "but, from your anxiety about her, I should imagine that you

were the gentleman who is about to marry Miss de St. Lance. I have my own reasons, and they are grave ones, for asking the question. Is it so?"

"Yes," replied Eric; "I hope to be married in October."

"Miss de St. Lance is exceedingly ill. I thought it better to speak to you. I am afraid of alarming madame, who does not seem strong."

Eric's face grew white as death.

"You do not surely think she is in danger!" he cried.

"She is certainly in a dangerous state, and I should like to have advice—extra advice. I should like to telegraph to London for Sir William Hailbury; he is the cleverest physician I know."

"She is so ill as that!" said Eric, in despairing tones. "Can you not give me one gleam of comfort, doctor?"

"Life and death are in God's hands," was the grave reply. "Sending for a physician is a matter of precaution. He may be able to suggest remedies that do not occur to me. I candidly confess that Miss de St. Lance's case puzzles me."

"Why does it puzzle you?" asked Eric.

The doctor thought for a few minutes before replying; then he said:

"I do not remember that in the course of my practice I have met with such strange symptoms before. I con-

fess that alone I can hardly decide upon them ; therefore, I urge you to send for Sir William."

"Is she so very ill?" asked Eric.

The sorrow in his voice touched the doctor's heart.

"I should advise you to lose no time," he said, "in going to Neverstay and sending a telegram. I think Sir William ought to be here to-night."

Without another word Eric went. To the last day of his life he remembered his ride through sunshine and bloom, while his own heart was aching with anxiety.

His beautiful, sweet, gentle Belle—how hard it seemed, how terrible hard ! Here the sun was shining warm and bright, the flowers fair, the happy birds singing on the trees, the air mild and sweet ; yet she who would have enjoyed it all was lying sick unto death. No wonder the young lover's face was so clouded and sad.

He sent the telegram, and that night Sir William Hailbury arrived. Dr. Grant was there to meet him.

By this time the whole household was aware of the dangerous state the young lady was in, and both grief and sympathy were very great.

Lord Arncourt walked restlessly from room to room ; madame sat with a troubled look on her worn face. The two doctors met alone.

"This is an urgent case, I suppose," said Sir William.

"I am afraid so," was the reply ; "you will judge when you see the patient. Sir William, I am going to ask you a strange favor. Will you see her alone, form your own

judgment; and compare it with mine. You will understand at once why I have asked you this."

Sir William was quite willing; then madame led him to Belle's room. He was there some time. The beauty, the sweetness, the touching circumstances of the case, all gave him more than ordinary interest in his young patient.

As question after question was answered, and one detail after another of the case was laid before him, the great physician's face grew grave. Then, when it was over, he went down to the library, and found Dr. Grant waiting for him.

"Are we quite alone?" asked Sir William. "No fear of being overheard, I trust?"

"Not the least in the world," replied Dr. Grant.

He turned the key of the lock as he spoke, and the two sat down in grave, solemn consultation.

"It is, as you said, Dr. Grant, a grave case. I know no graver. I have come to a certain conclusion over it, and am anxious to know if you have done the same."

"I have done so——"

"Then," interrupted Sir William, "the best thing for us to do will be each to write down his own opinion, and compare them."

Dr. Grant agreed. He took from his pocket a silver pencil-case, and wrote a few lines on the back of an envelope. Sir William did the same. Then each passed the paper to the other. Each contained the same words.

"I find the patient suffering from the consequences of an irritant poison, administered in minute doses."

When they had read it, the two gentlemen looked at each other.

"It is a terrible thing," said Sir William. "Who can be guilty of such cruelty? It cannot be accident; it must be design. What enemies can that fair creature possibly have?"

"I am as much puzzled as yourself," said Dr. Grant. "I have been attending the family for some time, and I do not think any member of it is more beloved than Miss de St. Lance."

"I have seen strange things in the course of my practice," said Sir William. "I once knew a gentleman poisoned by one of his own servants, in a similar fashion, out of revenge for something that had been said to him."

"I do not think there is a servant in this house that would injure one hair of Miss de St. Lance's head; she is dearly loved by all."

"I should imagine so," said Sir William. "She seems a very amiable girl. Still, you see, Dr. Grant, the poison must be administered by some one; it is impossible that it can be taken accidentally, or by accident. The doses are evidently very skillfully administered; they are not strong enough to prove fatal all at once, but they are strong enough to keep the girl very ill."

"You do not think, then, that she is past recovery?" said Dr. Grant.

"No ; it is found out just in time. Another dose or two would not hurt her ; four would, in all probability, prove fatal. They have certainly been most carefully given ; the matter has been carefully studied. We must at once interfere to prevent any more from being given. The greatest caution will be necessary ; we must say little, and watch. If our suspicions become known, there will be no hope of discovering the offender."

"No," said Dr. Grant ; "I can quite understand that. At the least hint of discovery on our part the offender would cease ; we must try and find out who it is without saying a word. I am so much astonished myself that I am hardly capable of forming a clear judgment. What would you advise?"

Sir William looked thoughtful.

"Do you know of any one who would benefit by her death?"

"No ; she has no money herself. I have always understood that her family—a very noble one, I believe—was ruined in the French Revolution. I cannot see how any one would benefit by her death. Her young lover, Mr. Chilvers, is devotedly attached to her. Unless I felt sure of the symptoms, I should say we must be mistaken ; that it could not possibly be true. I can see no motive for it."

"Motives are very difficult matters to understand," said Sir William ; "but there must be a powerful one at work here. As you know the family, Dr. Grant, tell me, whom

do you consider it would be better to tell? We must take some one in our confidence."

Dr. Grant looked at his companion.

"Lord Arncourt is no relation to Miss de St. Lance," he said; "I should hardly imagine that he would be the proper person to consult; then madame, her mother, does not look strong. I do not know whether you are of my opinion, but I always fancy women are not to be trusted in cases of this kind. Madame would be frightened, or would betray us by some words carelessly uttered. I think the best person to consult would be Mr. Chilvers, Miss de St. Lance's lover. He is like a son of the house; he would give us the best advice."

"I think you are right," said Sir William. "Will you ring the bell, and ask for him? I hope he is a man of good sense and judgment."

"You may be assured of that," replied Dr. Grant. "I know no man who would be more useful in such an emergency."

Dr. Grant rang the bell, and when the footman entered he told him to ask Mr. Chilvers to join them. A few minutes afterward Eric entered the room, looking so pale and agitated that Sir William asked him what was the matter.

"I am afraid," he replied, "that you have sent for me to tell me bad news. Is it so?"

"We have sent for you," said Sir William, "because it is needful we should confide in some one over the matter

I have to mention to you. Mr. Chilvers, it is a very grave one, and I must beg of you to give me your word of honor that you will not mention it."

"Will you not take a seat, Mr. Chilvers?" said Dr. Grant. "We shall in all probability detain you some time."

And Eric, all unconscious of what he was about to hear, took a seat, looking with grave attention at the doctors.

CHAPTER XLVII.

"WHO AM I TO WATCH?"

"What we have to say to you, Mr. Chilvers, is so grave that I must preface it by asking your most earnest attention. In the first place, you may believe most implicitly what we have to say to you. It is perfectly true—there can be no mistake or error in it—you must convince yourself of that first of all."

Eric bowed.

"I shall have no difficulty in believing what you say to me, Sir William," he replied. "I hope you do not find Miss de St. Lance very ill."

"She is very ill, but I may tell you I have good hopes of her life being spared. It is of Miss de St. Lance I wish to speak to you. Tell me, do you think she has any enemies?"

Despite the gravity of the situation Eric smiled. Enemies of that graceful, gentle girl, who had never harmed any human being, who loved and was beloved by every one! What enemies could she have?

"I do not understand your question," he replied; "but I venture to say no human being ever gave Miss de St.

Lance an unkind thought. I can safely say that she has no enemy in the wide world."

"Answer me another question," continued Sir William. "Would any person benefit by her death? Think well before you speak."

"There is no need for me to think," replied Eric. "Her death would not benefit any one. I should lose all the world in losing her. She is madame's only daughter. Miss Arncourt loves her dearly as though she were her own sister. How could any one benefit by her death? It is impossible. Why do you ask me so strange a question?"

"You will understand soon," replied Sir William. "Tell me one thing more—is Miss de St. Lance happy herself? Would she be likely, in any way, to injure herself?"

"No," replied Eric. "She is, I believe, most perfectly happy. I love her very dearly, and she loves me. She, like myself, has been looking forward with great delight to our marriage. I honestly believe she was one of the happiest girls in the world."

"Why do you say *was*?" asked the physician, quickly.

"Because since her illness she has been depressed and anxious—unlike herself, with a constant foreboding of an early death on her."

"That is one of the symptoms of her malady," said Sir William. "You know of nothing else?"

"No. If she had a hope of recovery she would be

what she was before—one of the most cheerful, happiest girls I ever met,” replied Eric. “But what strange questions, Sir William. Why do you ask them?”

“I will tell you,” said the physician, gravely; “you will be both shocked and terrified, but you must be courageous, for on your efforts will depend, in great measure, the solution of the mystery. After carefully examining the symptoms of Miss de St. Lance’s illness, my friend, Dr. Grant, and myself have both arrived at one conclusion—that is, she is being slowly poisoned by the administration of some mineral poison, given in such minute doses as slowly, but surely, to sap the foundations of life, and destroy her.”

Eric’s face grew ghastly white; then he laughed—a dreary laugh, that was almost terrible to hear.

“You must be mistaken, Sir William,” he cried out. “It is quite impossible that what you say can be true.”

“I expected you would say so; I anticipated the difficulty you would have in believing such a statement; but, I pledge you my word as a professional man, and my honor as a gentleman, that it is true. Dr. Grant, will you please corroborate my statement?”

The doctor looked at Eric.

“It is perfectly true,” he said. “I knew it yesterday, and that made me so anxious for Sir William’s advice. I thought at first that I must be mistaken; I paid the greatest attention to the details of the case, but the greater

my attention, the more sure I became that the unhappy lady was being slowly poisoned."

They saw great drops of moisture standing on Eric's brow, while his lips quivered with agitation.

"I can hardly believe it," he said. "Is it not possible, gentlemen, that there is some mistake?"

"I do not make such grave mistakes," said Sir William. "Make up your mind, Mr. Chilvers, that, terrible as the truth is, it is the truth, and there is no evading it. Do not be afraid. With the help and blessing of Heaven, we will save Miss de St. Lance, and we will circumvent those who are seeking to take her life."

"To take her life!" repeated Eric. "It seems too terrible. I cannot credit it."

"You must help us," continued Sir William. "The first thing I have to impress upon you is secrecy—the most inviolable secrecy. If one word gets known, we shall never discover the offender."

Eric made a desperate attempt to control himself. He saw that the doctors were convinced of the truth of what they were saying, and surely two such clever men could not be mistaken. One might, two could not. He must believe it, horrible as it was; yet who could, who would seek to harm his beautiful, gentle Belle?

"I will do all I can," he said; "but you must pardon me if I seem helpless and confused. It is a terrible blow to me."

"I can sympathize with you," said Sir William; "but

let me urge you to be brave, to try and collect yourself; for, remember, the fate of the lady you love may depend in some measure upon your efforts. Suppose that now we were to make a sensation over our discovery, to noise it abroad, the poisoner, be whom it may, would immediately abandon his or her plans, Miss de St. Lance might recover, and all for a time go well; but some one is determined to take her life, as this clearly proves. Who can tell when the attempt might be renewed, or how it might end? Do you not see the danger of making our discovery public?"

"Yes, I see it," replied Eric. "I will do my best. I will give you my full attention, my most earnest help. I was stunned at first, but now I can attend."

Sir William looked kindly at him. His face cleared, his hands ceased to tremble; his lips to quiver. The life of the girl he loved so dearly was at stake, and for her he could do much.

"The first thing," continued Sir William, "is to get some one to take the entire charge of Miss de St. Lance, to remain in her room, and to give her all that she takes—medicine and food. Whom would you recommend for that purpose, Mr. Chilvers? It should not be a servant or a hired nurse."

"It must either be her mother or Miss Arncourt," said Eric.

"Her mother, being the elder, would be preferable," said Sir William. "We must impress upon her that the

greatest attention to the patient's diet is needful. Mind, no hint need be given to her of the truth. I have the greatest esteem and respect for ladies, but I do not think they *can* keep secrets. No hint must be given to her. I shall merely tell her that such great caution is needed over the patient's diet, that Dr. Grant himself will order all that she has to take."

"Miss Arncourt is younger than madame; she would, perhaps, make the most watchful nurse," said Eric.

"No; I think the young girl's mother will be the best person to attend her. Then strict orders must be given that no one except ourselves and you, Mr. Chilvers, shall, under any pretext whatever, enter her room. You must, in the meantime, watch intently. Then we shall find out who gives the poison, if we discover nothing more."

"I will do it," replied Eric.

"It would be well for you to watch both night and day," said Dr. Grant; "you can do it without attracting attention."

"I will never leave my post till the culprit is discovered," said Eric; "that I promise you."

As he was speaking, Lord Arncourt entered the room. He was most courteous to Sir William.

"I hope," he said, "that you think favorably of our dear invalid. I am distressed to hear that she is so ill."

"I have hopes," replied the great physician; "but it is a case that requires careful watching. I thought

of intruding on your hospitality for a day or two, my lord."

"I shall be delighted and honored," replied Lord Arncourt; "but I am grieved to think that poor Belle is in such danger."

"She certainly is in great danger," was the reply. "But I hope we shall be able to waive it off. I thank you, my lord, for your courtesy. It is an involved, complicated case, and I should like to give it my closest attention."

Then Reine, who had been riding with Lord Arncourt, came in, her face brilliant in its glow of health. She looked from one to the other, and Lord Arncourt introduced her to Sir William Hailbury. He looked admiringly in her beautiful face.

"Do you think Miss de St. Lance very ill?" she asked him.

"Yes," he replied; "seriously ill. I intend remaining with her."

A little of the brilliant bloom faded.

"I am very sorry," she said, gently. "I thought and hoped it was half of it fancy; I told her so."

"I am afraid," said Sir William, sadly, "it is terribly real—the danger I mean."

Reine raised her dark eyes to his face.

"What is the matter with her?" she asked; "is it consumption or decline? I have heard that all the De St. Lances were consumptive."

"Indeed," said Sir William, "I cannot answer your question, Miss Arncourt. I am not sure, but I have no doubt Miss de St. Lance's illness is weakness, decline, or failure of strength, no matter what name it is called."

"Poor Belle !" said Reine, pityingly ; "I did not think it was so bad. I must go to her ; I must help to nurse her."

"It will be better not," said Sir William. "The fact is, that quiet and rest are essential to her. I am about to give strict orders that no one shall enter the room except the person who has charge of her."

"But I am her sister," said Reine ; "she always fancies my society cheers her. You must let me go."

"I am sorry to refuse a favor to so fair a lady," said the physician, with a courtly bow, "but I must do it."

"You must obey Sir William, Reine," said Lord Arncourt. "You must not enter Belle's room until he gives you permission. It is nothing infectious, I presume, Sir William ?"

"Not in the least," was the reply. "I tell you frankly, my lord, the young lady is in great danger. I trust it may be evaded, but her life hangs literally on a thread. Will you therefore give me permission to issue certain orders to your household, and to see that they are obeyed ?"

"I hope," said Lord Arncourt, graciously, "that while you are in this house, Sir William, you will consider yourself master of it. I am greatly distressed to hear this

news of poor Belle ; I have great hopes in your well-known skill."

Then Lord Arncourt and Reine quitted the library.

"Dr. Grant," said Sir William, "will you remain with the young lady for the next two hours? If she seems better then, we must do our best to prevent her from being made worse again. Mr. Chilvers, you cannot begin your watch too soon."

Eric left the doctors together.

"Who am I to watch?" he thought to himself. "A skillful detective would be of more use here than I am."

As he went from the library Reine overtook him.

"How grave these doctors look, Eric ; there is nothing much the matter with Belle, I hope?"

Looking at her bright face, he felt the greatest inclination to tell her his troubles. She looked so bright, so reliable ; he knew that she was quick and keen.

"She would make a far better detective than I shall," he thought, with a deep sigh, and Reine, looking at him, said :

"Eric, you sigh like Don Quixote. Cheer up ; the house is more like a tomb than anything else since this illness began."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

"HOW WAS HE TO FIND OUT BELLE'S ENEMY?"

Eric Chilvers, when he gained his solitude, was more bewildered than he had ever been before. He could no longer doubt the truth of the assertion made by the two doctors, yet he could not imagine who could be the culprit, who would injure gentle, simple, tender-hearted Belle, a girl who had never in the whole course of her existence hurt the feelings of any human being; a girl whose whole care was to be kind and considerate, whose thoughts were sweet as her words—who could injure her, who *dare*?

There was no servant in that household who did not seem to adore her, who was not ready at all times to obey her least wish at any trouble to themselves. Another thing puzzled him—what possible motive could any one have for so doing? How could her death benefit any person? She had no money, she was in no one's way; no life could possibly be more sweet, more useful, more harmless than hers.

Eric had recourse to man's great consoler—a cigar. He went out into the shady, fragrant gardens, and smoked as he thought; but the more he thought the more puzzled

he grew. There was no gleam of light for him; he could not see his way through the mists that surrounded him. Who could hate Belle so intensely as to want to take her life? Who hated her so bitterly as to wish to see her dead? If he could but discover them! His face darkened, his strong hands were clenched. If he could but discover them, there would be little mercy shown to them. Belle, so fair, so gentle, so sweet and loving.

He was not destined to be long alone. Reine, who was generally on the watch for him, had seen him from the windows of her room, and hastened to him. She would not let him think she had gone purposely to meet him. Despite the passionate love that grew stronger and more intense day by day, Reine had not lost her pride. She would not let him think that she sought him purposely. She took a book in her hands, and was seemingly bent upon finding a cool, shady spot for reading. Then, of course, she met him, and looked at him with well-feigned surprise.

"Eric, I thought you were dissolved in tears somewhere or other."

He did not like the light tone of her voice, or the bright smile with which she glanced at him. True, Belle was not her sister, but then they had lived together like children of one mother. Surely she might look more sorry, when beautiful Belle lay under the shadow of death.

"If I were weeping, Reine," he said, "it would be

nothing wonderful, considering how ill Belle is. Those doctors have frightened me."

"Of course they have," she replied, impatiently; "they intended to frighten you—they always do that; then they think you will attribute everything to their skill. I do not believe in doctors; they never agree; two of them never give the same opinion. My notion of a true science is one founded on invariable rules. I believe that if you had only been contented to leave Belle alone, she would have recovered; with one doctor she had a faint chance, two will be too much for her."

"Reine," said Eric, sternly, "how can you speak so lightly? Do you know that the girl you have called sister is in danger of death?"

Her beautiful face flushed hotly.

"I do not believe it," she said. "I do not believe that Belle will die; and, Eric, if she does, it will be very grievous, very sad; but then we all have to die."

"The knowledge of that fact makes it no easier to bear," he replied.

"No; but it gives one calmer and more philosophical ideas. Now, if I were dying there would be more to grieve over."

"Why?" asked Eric, briefly.

There was a half sad, half mocking smile on the girl's face as she replied:

"Belle is so good, I am so bad. In her case she simply finishes her life as an angel on earth, and begins a

new one as an angel in heaven. I am very different. I have nothing of the angel about me, and never shall have."

"You are right concerning Belle," he said; "but for your own sake, I hope you are wrong as to yourself."

"I am not," she replied. "Belle was a good child, always sweet and submissive, obedient. Madame never had to speak twice to her. I, on the contrary, was willful, passionate, wayward, hating all control, and bent upon having my own way."

"You are very candid," he said.

"Yes. I do not know that I am altogether so much ashamed of myself as I ought to be. I think, on the whole, I rather prefer naughty children to good ones. The pattern children in books annoy me beyond everything."

"You talk so wildly, Reine," he said.

She held up her pretty, white hand with a charming gesture.

"Listen," she said; "do you hear that chorus of birds? Own, now, that the wildest notes are the sweetest. When Belle talks to you, you never have to reproach her for being wild."

"Indeed I do not," he answered, earnestly.

"She is like the model children in the books. Ah, me, Eric! nothing could ever make me into a model. You are not listening to me, I see; your eyes have

that far-away look I know so well. Where are your thoughts?"

"With Belle," he replied, simply.

He did not see the impatient flush that rose to her face. Suddenly she turned to him.

"Eric," she asked, "what *should* you do if poor Belle died?"

His face grew quite white, his eyes grew dim with unshed tears.

"What should I do?" he repeated. "I am not sure that I should do anything. It would take all the brightness and the happiness out of my life forever. I don't say it would kill me—men are hard to kill; but the best part of me, my hopes and my happiness, would die with her. I cannot bear to think of it."

"It would be harder to bear, I suppose, if she were really your wife?"

"I do not know; I could not love her better. Do not talk to me even of the probability, Reine; I cannot bear it."

She looked keenly at him for a moment.

"You would never do anything foolish, Eric," she said. "You would not, for instance, think of suicide, as some men do when they lose what they love best?"

"No," he replied, gravely. "I should never do so; I should submit to the wise will of a great God. But, as I said before, it would take all the happiness away from my life forever."

Then they walked on for some time in silence.

"You would understand me better, Reine," he said, "if you had ever loved any one yourself. Until that time comes you will not understand either my love or my sorrow."

She looked at him earnestly.

"You think, then, Eric, that I have never loved any one?"

"I know that you are considered a very proud, fair lady," he replied; "and that people wonder why you send away one lover after another. I do not think you have any idea of love."

The beautiful, passionate face, the dark eyes, were turned for one moment toward him. If he had seen her then, he might have had some faint idea of her secret; but he was looking over the trees to the window of the room where Belle lay struggling against mighty death.

She followed the direction of his eyes, and her own grew brighter with a wild fire.

"Reine," asked Eric, suddenly, "do you think any one hates Belle?"

She was so startled that for one moment she could hardly reply. Her hands trembled, her face grew pale.

"Hates Belle?" she repeated, slowly. "Why should they?"

"That is the very question I ask myself, and ask in vain," he replied.

Then remembering how near he was betraying himself, he hastened to add :

"I was just thinking that if ever there was any one in the wide world who had the good will and kind wishes of every one who knows her, it would be Belle."

"I should say so, Eric. I have known her all my life, and never saw her do an unkind action, or heard her say an unkind word. I do not think any one could hate her, or even dislike her. Why do you ask me so strange a question?"

"I was thinking of her," he replied, evasively. "She looked so healthy and well when you both came together. I remember thinking, the first moment I saw her, that she had the fairest face, with the loveliest bloom I had ever seen. No one could have dreamed that she would die young."

"The De St. Lances are all delicate," said Reine. "Madame used to tell us about her husband and his fragile health. They are not a strong race, like the Arn-courts, for instance."

"I never thought Belle delicate. I used to watch her for hours; she walked well, and seemed strong. I cannot account for the change in her."

Then he suddenly remembered that if this horrible theory of the doctors were true, the change in her could easily be accounted for.

"You look very unhappy, Eric," said Reine, who had

watched the change that came over his face ; " could I do anything to make you happier ? "

" No," he said, gently. " You are very kind, Reine. All my happiness is centered in Belle. "

The girl looked at him wistfully ; there was something almost piteous in the gaze of those dark eyes.

" How dearly you must love her, Eric. "

" Love her ! Ah, Reine ! words are so weak, they will not express great love ; it can only be felt, not described. I do not think any man on earth ever loved a woman so dearly. "

" I must go in," said Reine, suddenly. " I fancied it would be pleasant out here, but it is not. "

The beautiful, restless face was flushed, the lips trembled.

" I thought you came out to read ? " said Eric.

" So I did ; but all places are alike to me. I may as well read indoors as without. Good-morning, Eric. "

" I wish I could read," he said. " I should like to lose the torment of my thoughts. "

But she noticed that he made no effort to detain her. He did not express any wish that she should remain with him, and Reine turned away, sick at heart.

" How can any man give his whole heart to that baby-faced girl ! " she thought. " A man like Eric—strong, noble, and manly. I could sooner love sugar-plums. Ah ! me, if I were a man, the woman I loved should have some fire with her sweetness, some passion, some life, some ani-

mation. She should be able to torment as well as love me, to give me some sauce-piquante when I required it. If I were a man, I could never love any one so sweet and so good as Belle."

Reine went back to the house, and Eric continued his solitary walk. What was he to do? How was he to find out Belle's enemy? and again he wished that he had not given that solemn promise of secrecy, so that he might use the keen, sharp wits of Reine.

It was madame who joined him next. She came out to him and walked with him, leaning on his arm.

"The doctors are both with Belle," she said, "and they advised me to come out for a little fresh air. Eric, how strange they seem. Do you know that they have forbidden me to leave the room, by night or by day, unless they are there to take my place."

"They are anxious over her, and they know that you, her mother, will take better care of her than any one else," said Eric.

But he could see the weary look deepen on madame's face, and he knew that she was ill at ease,

CHAPTER XLIX.

"HE WILL NEVER CARE FOR ME."

The long bright day came to an end at last. To Eric, it had seemed a century long; the warm summer hours oppressed him; he was ill both in body and mind; the strain upon his nerves was great; the anxiety was almost more than he could bear. He had felt ill before, but since the doctors had made their terrible communication he had felt worse.

When a duty lies straight before a man he can accomplish it, but Eric could not see his way through the duty laid upon him. He had been told that he was to watch—whom must he watch? He was quite at a loss what to do.

He took a kind of review of the servants; there was not one who did not express the greatest concern for the young lady. Besides, common sense asked him what object could these housemaids, cooks, footmen, and grooms have in Belle de St. Lance's death? It was most improbable.

Eric was wretched, not only from the fact of her illness, but because of the uncertainty over the culprit. It is not pleasant to know that you are under the same

roof with a would-be murderer; and some one, it was evident, intended to murder Belle. It was a relief to him when the dinner-bell rang, not because he wanted to dine, but because so much of the long, wearisome day had passed.

Lord Arncourt sent a pressing and courteous invitation to the two doctors to be present at dinner, and as madame was with Belle, they complied. Lord Arncourt inquired most kindly after their patient; they told him there was no change in her condition.

Then Reine, exquisitely dressed, entered the room. Sir William, grave and learned physician though he was, seemed struck with the girl's glowing beauty, enhanced by a grace of manner beyond all description, and a toilet exquisite in its elaborate simplicity.

All conquests came alike to Reine. In her heart there was one deep, passionate love—a love so intense that it had become a fire, and had destroyed all things before it; yet, despite this one great love, the young lady was not by any means averse to minor conquests.

She delighted in the homage of the great physician; she was at her best before him—witty, brilliant, and versatile; sarcastic, yet not unkind. He was charmed; he never remembered to have seen before so brilliant a combination of beauty and talent. When dinner was over she sang to him; her rich, clear, contralto voice seemed to echo through the room. Sir William listened until his eyes grew dim with tears.

"You renew my youth," he said to her. "When listening to you I forget I am toil-worn."

"Your toil has been in a noble cause," she said, in that gracious, winning manner of hers. "The world will be the better for your having lived in it, Sir William; you have done good to your kind."

"It has pleased Heaven to allow me to be of some little service," said the old doctor, "and I am thankful for it."

He was charmed with her. She reminded him of one of the brilliant French women who live in the pages of history.

"That girl could win or lose a kingdom," he said to himself. "She is irresistible."

Yet Eric Chilvers had preferred the star-like beauty of Belle de St. Lance.

"What brilliant talents!" thought Sir William; "what a strongly marked, resolute character! If she became what is called 'religious,' she would be earnest, fervent as an apostle; if she should ever fall, she would be the queen of sinners. She has character and strength of will enough for a dozen women, and each of them would be difficult to manage."

They did not remain long in the drawing-room. Lord Arncourt was more anxious over Belle than he cared to show. He did not know how he loved the fair, gentle girl until she was nearly lost to him. He could not sit there and enjoy idle conversation—listen to the strains of

such sweet music—while the shadow of danger hung over Belle. He went away soon; the doctors retired to their respective rooms. Eric was left alone. Twice the butler came in to see if he would have lights, but Eric sat in the gloaming, puzzling over what he should do.

The doctors had some little conversation before they parted.

“What a brilliant girl that Miss Arncourt is,” said Dr. Grant. “She is quite charming.”

“Yes,” replied Sir William, with his courtly smile. “I must say myself, that having the two ladies to choose from, I wonder that Mr. Chilvers did not choose her.”

Dr. Grant looked at him with a smile.

“I have found out one thing, Sir William; Mr. Chilvers has chosen as he would, but I am quite sure Miss Arncourt loves him.”

Sir William laughed.

“I do not think,” he said, “that Miss Arncourt is one who would love in vain.”

But Dr. Grant was not to be convinced or shaken in his opinion.

“I watched her,” he said. “I watched the play on her beautiful features; however deeply she seemed engrossed with others, she never for one moment forgot him; when her eyes rested on him, they seemed to fill with a deep, tender light; her voice took quite another tone when she spoke to him. I must flatter you by saying you were

so deeply engrossed in her that you did not notice these things."

"No, that I certainly did not. You think Miss Arncourt loves Eric Chilvers?"

"I am quite certain of it," replied Dr. Grant.

"In that case," said Sir William, slowly, "she cannot feel any great affection for Miss de St. Lance."

After these few words the doctors looked at each other in silence ; then Sir William said :

"May Heaven have mercy on us all !"

And Dr. Grant solemnly answered :

"Amen !"

They parted then ; but long after Dr. Grant had left him Sir William stood in the room silent and motionless.

"I have been so long in the world," he said, "that nothing ought to surprise me ; yet I must confess this does. I will not think of anything so terrible."

He took up a book, and tried to read, but some idea haunted him. He could not understand what he read.

Eric sat alone in the drawing-room, watching the last gray gleams of light die away on the trees and flowers. He was more unhappy than he could describe. Belle ill, so as to be in danger, was bad enough ; but Belle poisoned ! Belle put to the torture of a slow, lingering death ! It was like a horrible nightmare, a most horrible dream.

If he had followed the impulse of his own will, he would have aroused the whole household—he would

have created such a storm and tempest as must have brought the offender to light. The only thing that restrained him was the doctor's sensible advice, that no noise, no rumor should go abroad, lest the attempt, frustrated this time, should be renewed at another ; so he was obliged to sit inactive and miserable. As for watching, as he had promised, he had already given up the idea. Whom and what was he to watch ?”

As he sat in his perplexity, Reine entered. She had been wondering where he was, and although her interviews with him were so unsatisfactory, she longed to see him once again that night, just to hear one word more, even if that word should make her miserable.

“He never can be sitting in that great room alone,” she said to herself ; and she went in to see.

He had thrown himself down on one of the great Turkish cushions that filled the large western window ; he was looking sadly out on the moonlit lawn, wondering why this great trouble had overshadowed him, and had darkened his life.

“Eric,” said Reine, “is it possible that you are here alone, without lights, giving yourself up to all kinds of gloomy thoughts ? Cheer up ; you may have better news of Belle to-morrow.”

He looked at her gratefully ; her beautiful face, her kindly voice cheered him. She went up to him, and knelt down by his side. In this fragrant twilight she dare ven-

ture more than she had ever ventured before. She laid one white hand on his.

"Eric," she said, gently, "this will not do. You must not despond; you must bear up more bravely. I wish I knew what to do to comfort you."

He was weak and tired; the kindness of her voice seemed to touch the depths of his heart; he buried his face in his hands, and she heard a deep sob come from his lips.

Her face in that moment was wonderful to see—the envy, the impatience, that struggled with the passionate love. She bent over him.

"Eric," she said, gently, "do let me comfort you; I cannot bear to see you suffer so; let me comfort you."

She never forgot the anguish on his face as he raised it to hers.

"Reine," he said, in a low, hoarse voice, "I cannot bear to lose Belle. I do not know what I shall do; I cannot lose her."

"Could nothing—could no one console you if you lost her?" she said.

He did not in the least understand her meaning.

"No," he replied; "the world will only be to me a blank desert if she leaves it. I cannot bear it, Reine; the very thought of it unmans me, drives me mad—I am ashamed of myself—makes me weak and helpless as a child. No one can give me any comfort. You are very

kind, very good, but you cannot give health and strength to Belle."

He could not understand why she rose so impatiently, as though she would turn away, then knelt down again, as though she repented the impulse.

"Eric," she said, softly, "suppose your worst fears are realized—that Belle dies—you need not despair. In the time that comes after, you will find some one else who loves you perhaps even more than she does."

"Hush, Reine!" he cried; "you seek to comfort me in vain. All the beauty, the charm, the grace, the talent in the world could not make another Belle for me. Hark! Lord Arncourt is sending for me—I must go."

He rose, the tears still large and bright in his eyes, and went out, leaving Reine alone. When he was gone, she flung herself, with a passionate cry, among the cushions.

"My love!" she sobbed; "my wasted, wounded love! He will never care for me!"

She wept with the vehemence of anger and passion that shook her beautiful figure as the wind sways the leaves on the tree.

"He will never care for me," she said; "and I love him so dearly I would give him all my life; yet he likes that pale, baby-faced girl better than me!"

It was almost pitiful to see her in the great abandonment of her sorrow.

"Even if she dies he will not care for me. He will make himself a martyr and a hero, by being what he will

call true to her memory. He is so blind, so weak, to care for her. Why should I love him? why should I waste my heart, my soul, my life on him, who is content with the love of that baby face? I hate myself, yet I knew that when love came to me, it would be all fire."

She rose from the ground; she gathered together the magnificent hair which had fallen around her. She went to the door and stood there listening.

There was deep silence in the house, unbroken save by the distant sound in the servants' hall; Reine shuddered as she stood there.

"It is like the silence of the grave," she said to herself.

Then she heard the library door open, and Eric came out with Lord Arncourt. They say good-night; Lord Arncourt told Eric to go to rest at once.

"You are making yourself quite ill," he said, "and, as yet, I will not believe that our pretty Belle is in danger."

CHAPTER L.

DISCOVERED.

Deep silence had fallen upon the house. The servants, with the exception of one who sat up in case of emergency, had all retired to rest. Lord Arncourt was in his room, the doctors had retired to theirs, and Eric, though he longed for rest, was still unable to sleep. He heard the clock strike eleven, twelve, one, and two ; still he was unable to rest. His thoughts were all with Belle—Belle, whom he loved so dearly, and who lay in danger of death. He saw the moonbeams lying in great floods of silvery light on the floor of his room. He was wondering if ever he should walk in the moonlight with Belle again.

Suddenly he heard the same sound that had startled him once before, the sound of noiseless footsteps passing his door. None but the quickest ears could have detected them ; but Eric was quick of hearing.

“What is that?” he thought. “Who can it be? Who can be moving through the house with those hushed, quiet footsteps? Who could it be? What could they be going to do? Why, if business or necessity called any one at this strange hour, why make a mystery of it?”

Suddenly, like lightning, the idea flashed over him :

“Was it any one who intended any harm to Belle?”

The next moment he had resolved upon opening the door and going to see what and who it was.

At the farther end of the corridor he saw a tall figure moving with a gliding, noiseless step—a figure clothed in a long gray dressing-gown.

He closed his door so quietly that no sound could be heard, and started in pursuit.

The tall figure glided on, down the broad staircase, through the corridor that led to Belle's room. He followed.

At the door of Belle's room it stopped, and he stopped also. His heart beat so quickly and so loudly, as it seemed to him, that he was afraid of betraying himself.

He felt sure that here was the clew to the mystery; that he held it here in his hand; that this person, let it be whom it might, was going into her room to do her deadly harm; that was the reason of the cautious, secret, noiseless movements.

Then the door opened; the tall figure entered, leaving the door open. Eric followed. He concealed himself behind the heavy hanging curtains, where he could watch unseen.

Belle lay in a calm, death-like slumber. The light of the lamp was so arranged that it should not disturb her; but in the dim light he could see the pale, death-like face. There was no sign of life in her, except the gentle breathing which parted her pale lips.

Madame de St. Lance was seated in an easy chair, also fast asleep. Hers was apparently the sleep of exhaustion, she was weary with watching.

All this Eric saw at one glance.

The tall figure leaned for one moment over Belle, looked at the poor, sweet face, went over to madame, and looked intently at her.

Then Eric saw the woman (he had not yet seen her face) go up to the little stand where the lamp with the medicine bottles were all arranged. She opened one of them. It contained two or three doses of a soothing cordial that Sir William had prescribed.

Then from the pocket of her dress she took a small vial, and slowly, carefully, steadily dropped, counting the drops, some of its contents.

There could be no more doubt as to who was the poisoner.

She raised the bottle to the light; as she did so, Eric caught a glimpse of her face.

"Great Heaven!" he cried, "it is Reine!"

She turned her beautiful ghastly face. She tried to move, and as she did so, the table with the lamp was upset, and they were left in total darkness.

The terrible noise awoke and alarmed madame. She sprang from the chair with a loud cry, but in the darkness she could distinguish nothing. No idea except that of thieves occurred to her. She remembered that she had not locked the room door, and she immediately concluded

that thieves had broken into the house, and finding that door most easily opened had gone in there. With that idea firmly fixed in her mind, madame went to the door.

"Thieves !" she cried in a loud voice. "Thieves !"

Then Eric rushed after her ; he caught her and brought her back.

"There are no thieves," he said ; "it is ten thousand times worse than that." He closed the door. "Have you a light?" he said ; "no means of finding a light?"

But madame was too terrified to speak.

Just then there came another sound at the door. Lord Arncourt and Sir William were the only two who had heard that cry of "Thieves !" and they had both hastened to the rescue. Lord Arncourt fortunately had a taper in his hand. They both looked aghast at the scene before them.

Belle lay, white and trembling, too frightened to speak ; madame was half-fainting ; Eric, his face all in a glow of indignation and anger, stood holding her. But the face that attracted all attention was that of Reine ; nothing so ghastly, so terrible, had ever been seen before.

Lord Arncourt looked from one to another.

"Eric ! Reine !" he cried. "What is the matter?"

Eric caught Reine's hand.

"Take that vial, Sir William, and tell us what it contains."

Sir William took it. He looked at it, then at them.

"Speak out, I pray you," cried Eric. "What does it contain?"

Then the physician named a poison that even the most ignorant know to be of a deadly nature.

"Will you take it and keep it in your possession," said Eric, "until it is required?"

"But, what does this mean?" cried Lord Arncourt. "Madame, it was your cry I heard; what does it mean?"

For all answer, madame wept aloud.

"Eric!" cried he, "what is it? Why are you here? What is the meaning of this scene? I must know. Reine, why do you look so ghastly—what are you doing? Will no one speak to me?"

"I beg you to control yourself, my lord," said Sir William. "I have a faint inkling of the truth; if it be what I imagine, silence will be the best."

He turned suddenly, for madame had fallen fainting to the ground.

Then Eric, still holding Reine's white wrist, said:

"We must not forget that we are in a sick-room. Lord Arncourt, come with me; I will tell you what this means."

Still holding Reine, he led the way to one of the large state bedrooms that opened on to the same corridor.

"Eric," cried Lord Arncourt, "I cannot understand you. Will you explain what this means? Why are you treating my daughter in this fashion? Why are you bold-

ing Reine's hand as though she were a criminal, and you her accuser? What does this midnight scene mean? I cannot understand. Reine, if Eric will *not* speak to me, *you* must."

Then Eric released his hold of that white wrist; he placed Reine in a chair, for during this time she had spoken no word.

"I will tell you what it means," he said. "It means that your daughter, Reine, is one of the wickedest of women; she is the most false of all traitresses."

"Stop!" cried Lord Arncourt. "Neither you nor any other man shall say those things of my Reine."

He made one step forward, his face in an angry flame, his eyes flashing fire.

"One more such word, Eric Chilvers, and it shall be your last!"

He held up his hand with a warning gesture.

"Wait! Hear me in patience; she is all that and worse. Nay, Lord Arncourt, even killing me will not mitigate your daughter's crime. Listen. I did not tell you before, because secrecy was thought advisable. Do you know what ails the sweet, tender-hearted girl who never wronged or wounded one single soul? Do you know what ails her? what is destroying the fair life? what is sending her, young and well-loved as she is, to an early grave?"

"No," replied Lord Arncourt; "I do not know."

He was beginning to feel anxious, hardly knowing why.

"I will tell you. She is being slowly but surely poisoned by your daughter, Reine."

Again Lord Arncourt made an angry step forward. He raised his hand as though he would strike Eric to the ground.

"I would not believe it, Eric Chilvers," he said, "if you swore it."

"It is true. I will tell you all about it. Dr. Grant suspected it, but was loth to believe it. He would not trust to his own judgment, but when the symptoms confirmed his ideas he sent at once for Sir William Hailbury, who arrived at the same conclusion. They both felt certain that she was being slowly and secretly poisoned. Then the difficulty was to discover by whom. It was in order to make that discovery that the doctors have remained here. You yourself would have been told all this to-day. In the interim, they asked me, in the interest of justice, to find out the culprit if I could. It was a most difficult task, my lord. Every one loved the gentle girl whose life is filled with thoughts for others. It was hard to find out who would harm her. I tried my very best, but failed. I could not think of any one who would be likely to hurt Belle. It was difficult, but Heaven helped me. Last night, for the second time, I heard the sound of stealthy footsteps passing my door. I opened the door and followed the tall figure down the corridor. I followed it to the door of Belle's room, and went in after it. I saw the woman I had followed take a small vial from her pocket

and drop some of its contents into Belle's medicine bottle. I caught her wrist while she held the vial in her hand. That woman was Reine. The vial she held contained a deadly poison. You heard Sir William declare it, and now I repeat, that your daughter has willfully tried to poison my promised wife. In the silence of the night she has crept to her room ; she has mixed poison with her medicine ; she has tried to kill her."

"I will not believe it," cried Lord Arncourt ; but Eric saw the red flush had died from his face, and the angry light from his eyes. "I cannot believe it. I say it is all false, and you are mad, quite mad, to accuse my beautiful Reine of such a crime !"

"Nay, Lord Arncourt, it is easy to deny it, to call me mad ; but I assure you most solemnly it is true. You cannot doubt when I tell you that Sir William himself took the vial from her hand, and he will tell you what its contents are."

"Eric," cried Lord Arncourt, "be pitiful to me ! She is my only daughter ! Say it is not true."

"I cannot. I would if I could. I cannot do so. She is guilty before Heaven, and I declare it."

Lord Arncourt looked at his daughter. The beautiful face had regained all its bloom, all its pride ; there was no longer any fear in it.

"Reine ! Reine !" he cried. "I will *not* believe it. Say, for Heaven's sake, that it is not true !"

But she made no answer. He looked piteously at Eric.

"Why should she do it?" he said. "What sense, what reason is there in it? What possible motive could she have for such a crime?"

"I do not know," replied Eric. "I cannot see that she had any motive. Belle has never injured her. They have lived like sisters; their lives have been passed together. I cannot tell you *why* she has done it; I only know that she *has* done it. The motive is a mystery."

There was a sound of some one trying to open the door. Eric turned, and saw madame. With a pale, scared face, she went up to him, and, in a voice that trembled with emotion, she asked:

"What is the matter, Eric? Tell me. Belle is very ill. What has Reine done?"

She turned to her, clasping her white, thin hands.

"Oh, Reine!" she cried; "tell me what it is that you have done?"

CHAPTER LI.

CONFESSING HER CRIME.

Reine looked from one to the other, the half-mocking smile still on her lips. Madame, with all the dignity of despair, turned to Lord Arncourt.

"My lord," she said, "will you tell me what Reine has done?"

"I will tell you what she is accused of," he replied. "Mr. Chilvers accuses her—my daughter and your charge, madame—he accuses her of poisoning Belle. Was ever charge so monstrous, so cruel? And she sits there silent; she will not deny it; she will not defend herself by one single word."

Madame's face grew ghastly as she listened; she leaned on one of the chairs for support.

"Poisoning Belle!" she repeated. "It is not possible; she could not do it."

Then madame's voice died away; she had thought of something which made the deed seem very probable. She remembered one night, when waking suddenly, she had found Reine in Belle's room, and Reine held a bottle in her hand; she remembered the scared, frightened expression of the girl's face as she turned to her.

"What are you doing here, Reine?" she had asked, and the answer had been that she could not sleep, and had come to see how Belle was. Madame had felt uneasy at the time. She thought of it now. A hundred little incidents seemed to flash into light, and she gave a low cry of pain and despair.

"Reine," said Lord Arncourt, "let me know the worst. Did you really commit this most cruel and wicked sin—have you really tried to poison Belle?"

She raised her face to his ; it was full of proud despair.

"I would deny it," she said, "if denial were of any use. Sir William and the little vial will be too much for me. I have really tried to poison Belle."

In the silence of the night the words fell with a strange, weird sound. Lord Arncourt sat down ; the strength of his strong limbs failed him.

Reine looked at none of them as she continued :

"There is grace enough left in me to make me say that I am almost glad I have not succeeded. After all, I have a faint liking for the baby-faced girl. It is perhaps quite as well that it has been found out. I might not have been happy if she had died."

Lord Arncourt rose from his seat and went over to her.

"Reine," he asked, slowly, "are you a woman ? or are you a beautiful fiend ?"

"Whichever you like, papa," she replied, with a reckless laugh ; "a mixture of both. Certainly all of the fiend that there ever was in me has been aroused of late ;

yet, you see, I cannot be all wicked, for I am heartily glad that I did not kill poor, pretty Belle. Let her live her weak little life."

"Reine! Reine!" cried Lord Arncourt, "it cannot be you speaking in that style; it cannot be you; and yet I know that you have no heart."

"It would be well for me if I had not," she replied, with a bitter laugh. "The misfortune is, that I have too much heart, though I grant that it is different to other people's."

Then madame stretched out her hands imploringly.

"Reine!" she cried. "what are you saying? It is too horrible; I cannot endure to hear it."

Eric stood by in silence; he turned to her now.

"Reine," he said, gravely, "will you tell us what led you to this crime? what has made you a murderess?"

"I am not sure that I shall tell you," she replied. "I think that I prefer passing from your sight forever without giving you any clue to what you are pleased to call my crime."

"I know!" moaned madame. "Poor, unhappy child, I know!"

"Not," continued Eric, "that anything *can* excuse you. You are a traitress—a murderess; you have smiled while that innocent girl suffered; you have kissed her with your lips, and with your hands dropped poison into her cup. Ah! false, wicked, worthless that you are, what excuse can you offer?"

"It was very bad of me," she said; "but do you know that if I were tempted, I should do the same thing over again? All the same, I am glad poor Belle will be saved."

"You are a heartless girl," he cried, angrily. "What was your motive for the crime?"

Slowly, gracefully, proudly, she turned to him. Surely, one of the most beautiful women ever seen; her magnificent wealth of hair falling over her white shoulders; her lovely face flashing; her dark eyes all alight.

"*You* ask me that question!" she said. "*You* taunt and upbraid me. *You* denounce me and expose me to the world. *You* lay my crime bare before the eyes of men. *You*, for whose sake I have suffered and sinned. I will tell you why I tried to poison Belle; it was because I loved you so dearly and so well that I would have committed any crime for the sake of winning your love."

He started back, as though she had stabbed him; and madame held out her hands with an imploring gesture.

"It was because I loved you so well," repeated Reine. "*You* who have denounced me." She stood proudly facing him, fearless, brave dauntless, if it had been but in a good cause. "I said long ago," she continued, "that if love ever came to me it would be a fire—not a sentiment, but a fire—and it has proved so. I am not ashamed to say that I love you; I loved you the first moment I saw you. I loved you in spite of your coldness, your indifference; all the strength, the love of my heart I have given to you who have denounced me; such love as

you—weak and miserable—could never dream of ; such love—oh, my God !—as might have made me a good woman if it had been fortunate. It is too late for all that now, too late ; I need not think of it ; but Eric, if you had known the height, the depth, the greatness of my love, even you would pity me.”

Her rich musical voice had sounded so clearly it had seemed to thrill with pain, and now it died away in a low murmur on her lips ; for one moment her pride and strength seemed to give way. She buried her face in her hands, with a low, despairing cry :

“I might have been so happy and so good, but for my unhappy love,” she moaned ; “and you—you whom I loved so well—have denounced me.”

His face grew pale as he listened to her.

“I did not know it, Reine,” he said, gently.

“No,” she replied ; “you did not know it. It does not matter now. But, Eric, I gave you my heart, my heart’s love—love that might have crowned a king ; love that would have infolded you as a shield ; love that would have been immortal ; love that would have made me a noble woman, but now has made me—a fiend ! The world is full of beauty, of wealth, and of power. I asked but one thing from it, and that was your love. I have not got it ; and I am utterly careless as to what becomes of me. I do not care if you denounce me to the whole world, if you publish my sin from the house-tops. You can do just as you please.”

"But, Reine, surely what you are pleased to call love would never drive you to the commission of such a horrible crime?"

"I told you," she said, "that my love was a fire, destroying all things before it—a fire that lays waste and burns. That baby-faced girl stood between me and my love; I have sought to remove her. I was as one mad, Eric, when I found that you cared for her, and not for me; that you loved her, and not me. You talk of suffering, Eric! You calm, cold people do not even know what suffering means. I could tell you—I, whose despair has driven me to murder!"

There was an intensity of tragic sorrow about her that startled them.

"I might," she continued, "have been a good woman; good in a commonplace kind of way, like other people, but for that——"

"It is not too late, Reine," said Eric, touched by her drooping attitude, her humility and despair; "it is not too late. You may thank Heaven that your sin has been discovered before it was too late. There is yet time for you to be good and happy."

"No; there is not. I shall not thank Heaven, nor have I any wish for the good and happy time you speak of. I shall take evil for my good."

"Reine, Reine, do not talk so; you pierce my heart with those words," cried Lord Arncourt.

"As mine was pierced long ago," she said, "by Eric's

neglect. I only speak as I feel. I am utterly reckless. I am not even ashamed of having been found out. Mine is a case of perverted affection. I always *was*, and now am more inclined to evil than ever. Still, wicked as I am, traitress and murderess, Mr. Chilvers, as you call me, I am still thankful that Belle has been spared."

Madame turned to her with an air of dignity and command.

"I will not allow you to speak in that reckless fashion, Reine. Rather fall on your knees and thank Heaven that you have been spared the commission of so great a crime."

Reine looked haughtily at her.

"Do not interfere, madame," she said; "it is no business of yours."

"It is my business," said madame. "I trained you; you have been for years to me as my own child."

"I have no wish to bear the illustrious name of De St. Lance," said Reine, with cool sarcasm. "I prefer my own."

"Which you have disgraced," said madame, with flashing eyes, her pale face growing crimson. But nothing she could say could affect the proud spirit of the girl.

"There is one thing I *must* say, madame. You can receive my father's bounty as long as you will, but that does not entitle you to any control over me. You have made our home your home; you have brought your daughter here, and have seen her stand between me and the man I love; you have helped her to win the love for which I

would have died ; and now you presume to preach to me."

"May Heaven forgive you?" said the lady, sorrowfully. Reine laughed.

"I should indeed need forgiveness if I allowed myself to be preached to, madame."

Her cool insolence aroused Madam. de St. Lance.

"My lord," she said, "I appeal to you."

But the strong, proud man had broken down completely.

"Would to Heaven," he said, "that I had died before I had known this. Oh, madame, brought you a child, a little child, pure in heart, guileless in soul, and you have returned to me a monster—a beautiful woman without a heart. What do you say of your training, you who were to have been as a mother to my motherless child? Where is the care, the wise counsel that should have made a good woman of her? I gave to you a child ; you return to me a murderess. What am I to say to you?"

"Reine," said Eric, earnestly, "you see what misery you cause. Repent of your evil deeds : change your defiance and pride into repentance and humility, so that in the time to come we may be happier."

"I shall not interfere with your happiness," she replied, drearily ; "you may all be happy enough without me. Ought I to curse the day I saw you, Eric? And pray tell me, you religious people, who deal out rewards and punishments so freely, pray tell me what is due to the father

who neglected me, who deserted me in my infancy, who was ashamed of my mother and ashamed of me?"

A cry of unutterable pain came from Lord Arncourt's lips. Then madame, with a stern, white face and uplifted hand, said :

"Hush ! not one word more. I have something to say."



CHAPTER LII.

"THAT WAS THE HOUR OF MY TEMPTATION."

"I have something to say," she repeated. "Lord Arncourt, no one has repaid kindness more basely than I have done. You trusted me, and I have betrayed your trust ; you were generous to me, and I have made a sorry return for your generosity. See ! I am a proud woman, but I kneel here at your feet to implore your pardon."

She sank upon her knees, and Lord Arncourt, looking up, saw the beautiful head, with lines of silver in the dark hair, bent before him.

"Madame !" he cried.

But she went on :

"You came to me, Lord Arncourt, long years ago, in sorrow and distress ; you placed the greatest trust in me that you could possibly place in any woman—you gave me your child. Oh, my lord ! I was unworthy, all unworthy ; yet I did my duty by her. I trained her carefully as my own. Before that time came, I had suffered greatly from privations and poverty. The handsome sum that you paid to me freed me. For the first time for some years, I found myself able to find the necessaries and some of the comforts of life. For some years I lived in peace ; then the

time of my terrible temptation came, and I fell. You wrote to say that your daughter was to come home and take her proper place in your house. That was the hour of my temptation. You said that I, too, was to come, and from the tone of your letter, I knew that you meant that home to be mine. But then, I thought to myself, a thousand things might happen—you might remarry; then there would be no home, no provision for me. My lord, as I stood watching the two girls, a sudden idea occurred to me, that I would give you *my* daughter in place of your own."

Lord Arncourt cried out in astonishment, and Eric drew nearer; Reine bent her proud face with a look of supreme, scornful wonder, on madame.

"I can hardly tell you why I did it," she continued; "the idea flashed suddenly in my mind. I thought to myself that by so acting I should always have a hold over you; that if you should marry again, if you should lose your interest in me, and your kindness wear itself out, that then I could say to my daughter, 'You are mine!' and that she would, for the sake of our secret, keep me from poverty. It was a foolish idea, but fear of poverty drove me to it, nothing else. It was foolish, because I knew that whatever I might do myself, it would be impossible for me to teach my child dishonor. My lord, the shame is mine; the disgrace is mine. Reine is *my* daughter, not *yours*; Belle is the same little Nina you brought to me years ago."

"But, madame," cried Lord Arncourt, "what have you gained by this cruel deception?"

"Nothing," she replied. "I think that the fear of poverty drove me half mad. I thought that if my daughter were established at Neversleigh, that I should never know want again, for she would supply all my wants. My motives were weak enough, that I own most frankly; so weak, that now I think of them, I cannot see how I ever yielded to so foolish a temptation—I cannot understand it. Yet I thank Heaven now that Belle is your child, and that the shame of this most wicked deed must fall on me, not on you."

"That is all very well," said Reine, coldly; "it does not alarm me in the least. It is one thing for you to make such an assertion, madame, but quite another for us to believe it. You must find some stronger proof than your own word."

"I can easily do that," said madame, "you foolish child; do you think I dare say such a thing if it were not true? I have but to send to Provence, I have but to summon my old servant Janette, or any of the people who knew us there, and I can easily satisfy you there needs no proof. I am your unhappy mother; Heaven knows I should not claim such a child as you unless dire need obliged me.

"I will send for Janette; I will send, if you wish it, for the *cure* who knew you, for the doctor who attended you, and without one word from me, they will both recognize

Belle as the daughter of the English milord, who was brought to me."

"I thank Heaven," said Lord Arncourt, "who could recognize one trait of my darling child in this proud, willful girl? Yet I have loved you very dearly, Reine."

"Have you?" she said. "I should hardly have imagined it, my lord, you seem to be so pleased to be rid of me."

"Madame," asked Eric, "is this true? You would not surely deceive us a second time?"

"It is true as that one day I must answer for my sins," she said. "Oh, Eric, how can you doubt? Think of the difference between the two. Belle never gave me one day's trouble; she was always sweet, docile, obedient, submissive, humble, and truthful. She never gave me one minute's pain. She would be some comfort to me in my old age. Reine was always a great trouble; she was always proud, willful, defiant. I never could understand her. She had all the faults, but few of the virtues of her race; she has all the defects of her country. Oh, Eric, Eric! what comfort can she be to me? Why should I claim her if she were not indeed mine?"

"I am convinced," said Eric. "I have often thought myself, and have often heard others say, that Belle was far more like the Arncourts than Reine."

"You will be superlatively happy now," said Reine. "You are not only marrying the girl you love, but you are wedding Lord Arncourt's daughter and great heiress. As

for me, I care but little whose daughter I am ; my life is all darkened."

"My lord," said Madame de St. Lance, "I pray you to pardon me. I have never been happy ; I have always been sorry that I did it. I have had a weight on my mind, a burden on my conscience, that has given me no peace. I believe that whether this had happened or not, I must have told you sooner or later."

"I always thought you had some terrible secret on your mind, madame," said Eric. "You have always had the saddest face of any woman I ever saw."

"I was wretched. But let me own all my sin ; I yielded to temptation partly from fear of poverty, and partly because I loved Reine so dearly ; she was so beautiful, so bright, I could not bear to think of her living always in poverty and exile. I thought she would come here as Lord Arncourt's daughter, that she would marry well ; then, when her position was secured, I cared little whether my deception was known or not. I cannot justify myself, but I did love her most dearly."

"She has ill repaid your love," said Eric.

Then madame raised her face to Lord Arncourt.

"My lord," she said, humbly, "I pray you to pardon me. I ask your forgiveness for the grievous wrong I have done you."

"You have it," said Lord Arncourt, as he raised her ; "you should not kneel to me, madame. I pardon you—

it was *a woman's temptation*, and you yielded to it. More grievous harm might have been done, but I thank Heaven we have discovered all in time to avoid it. Madame, you have my full pardon; there can never more be confidence between us, but you shall not have one reproach from me; and let me add, the poverty you dreaded shall not be yours—I will provide for you.”

Then he went to Reine.

“As for you, my poor, unhappy child,” he said, “I will reproach you no more—your sin has found you out; you have narrowly escaped being a murderess. In gratitude to Heaven, I implore you to lead a better life, and repent of your sins.”

Not one feature of her proud face changed; her lips did not quiver, her hands did not tremble.

“You have never loved me, Lord Arncourt; you have always liked Belle best.”

“I have been the kindest of fathers to you, Reine,” he said; “but to tell you the truth, I was always disappointed in you because you had no heart.”

“No heart!” she repeated, bitterly; “yet I have ruined myself for love.” She looked round on them all with a mocking smile. “It is like the close of a melodrama,” she said. “Virtue—that is Belle—triumphs, marries, and lives happily ever afterward. Vice—which I personify—is punished for all sins, and lives miserably. Let me ask one question; I have owned my crime; I confess freely that I tried to kill Belle; that I did it, hoping that if she

died Eric Chilvers would marry me. I thought that in time I might win his love. I find now that I was mistaken, that there can be no such love for me. I own my crime, and I wish to ask, 'Are you going to punish me for it?' I do not care ; my life is darkened forever. If you decide on sending me to prison, I go willingly. What does it matter whether I am in a palace or a prison ? If you send me to trial, I shall plead guilty, and be transported, I suppose. I do not care in the least ; but I should like to know if you are willing to tell me what you intend doing?"

"It is my daughter whom you have injured," said Lord Arncourt, "but I have no wish to punish you. You may go free, yet I should like to hear that you repent of your sin."

"It is my promised wife whom you have tried to send to her death," said Eric, "but I will not punish you. I, too, should like to know that you repent of your sin."

"I am not one of the repenting kind," said Reine. "If it were to be done over again, and I had the hopes of winning your love, Eric, I should do it ; you cannot call that repentance, and that is the true state of my mind. You have decided *not* to punish me. Madame, you are one of those who sit in judgment on me ; am I to be punished, or go free ; will you accuse me, or shall I escape?"

"I leave you to Heaven," said madame, with pale, trembling lips.

"I am very much afraid that Heaven will have nothing to do with me," said Reine, with a smile. "I am to go free, then. I shall go away where no one can even look upon me again—none of you, I mean. I might have been good now ; I choose evil as my portion, and I go deliberately to the bad. You will not hear of me again."

"Reine," said Lord Arncourt, "be persuaded by those who have your interest at heart. I will provide for you. True, you cannot remain here, nor, with my consent, shall you ever see Belle again ; but I will provide a home and an income for you if you will be reasonable and accept it."

"Thank you," she replied ; "you are kinder than I deserve."

But they remembered afterward that she did not promise to avail herself of his kindness.

"You must not see Belle again," continued Lord Arncourt ; "and because you have been as my child, because I have loved you, because you are young, with a long life before you, I promise you one thing : The knowledge of your shameful crime shall be kept a secret, no one shall know it, with this exception—Sir William Hailbury. We must tell him ; but he, I am quite sure, will never betray you ; so that if you will only repent, you may have a long and happy life before you yet."

Her face flushed for one moment.

"You are kinder to me than I deserve," she said. "I shall always remember that."

And before they could prevent her, or say another word, she was gone !

CHAPTER LIII.

"YOU WILL NOT FORGIVE ME?"

Sir William Hailbury was not so much astonished as one would have imagined. He listened to Lord Arn-court's long story without comment. When it was ended, he looked calmly at the nobleman's excited face.

"Do you know," he said, "none of this surprises me very much. I thought that the young lady was more French than English; and she seemed to me to have every qualification both for the height of good and the depth of evil. I should not have been surprised to have heard that she had done the greatest and most heroic deeds, nor am I surprised to find that she has attempted an atrocious crime; it is ten thousand pities that she has gone wrong. What do you intend doing with her, my lord?"

"I thought of settling an income upon madame, and asking her to return to France. The girl is so young there is a hope of her improvement."

But the wise old physician shook his head.

"I am afraid not," he said. "When a woman of her force of character, her strength of will, goes wrong, the chances are a hundred to one that she never reforms."

"I hope *she* will," said Lord Arncourt. "I really loved the girl, believing her to be my own daughter. I am sure there are capabilities of good in her, if she had only been differently trained."

Lord Arncourt was looking thoughtfully over the green trees.

"I am surprised," he said, "that this idea never struck me before. I have always thought that Belle so greatly resembled my lost wife, not in features—my wife was as fair as a lily—but in her gentle, graceful, half-timid, half-coy, pretty ways. She has the same sensitive, loving, gentle heart, while Reine has all the pride and hauteur of her race; she is perfectly French, with the imperious notions of the grand old noblesse. What a sad thing it is! and, in some measure, I blame myself."

"Why?" asked Sir William, briefly.

"In the first place, because I neglected my child for so many years; and in the second, because I fear greatly that I encouraged Reine's liking for Eric Chilvers."

"In what way?" asked Sir William.

"I allowed her to see how pleased I should be with a marriage between them. I threw her continually in his society; I never omitted any opportunity of praising him. I feel that I have been greatly to blame; still, I must do the best I can for her now. Sir William, you will keep all this unfortunate matter a secret?"

"You may rely upon me. In my profession I have met

with even stranger things than that. It will have to be known some time or other."

"It must be known soon," said Lord Arncourt. "I must do full justice to my own daughter, and I cannot do that without exposing madame's fraud. I shall say as little about it as possible, but it must be done. I shall send a paragraph to the *Times*; that will go round all the papers in England. We must bear patiently all the annoyances that result. It will be 'Romance in High Life,' 'Romance of the Peerage;' but when the nine days' wonder is over, it will all die away, and in the course of time people will forget it. I shall see that it is done at once. We have said nothing to Belle at present; but do you think she is in danger now?"

"No," replied Sir William. "The danger was caused by the poison; now that that has ceased, the illness itself will cease. She will soon be strong and well again, but of course she will require care."

"Would you advise us to tell her what has passed?" asked Lord Arncourt.

"Only some portion of it; and not even that just yet. Of course she must know that she is your daughter, but I think that if I were in your place I should never tell her that the girl she loved as a sister had tried to poison her. The knowledge could do her no good, and might do her harm. If you take my advice, you will never allow her to know that."

"I think you are very wise," replied Lord Arncourt.

"She will, without doubt, be stronger and better in a few days ; then I will tell her myself all that it is desirable for her to know. To you, Sir William, I tender my most sincere and heartfelt thanks. You have not only been physician, but friend."

This conversation took place on the day after the fatal discovery. Dr. Grant had heard nothing of it.

"The fewer people admitted to the knowledge of such a secret, the better," thought Lord Arncourt.

Dr. Grant was told that the culprit had been discovered, but that the whole matter, for many reasons, would be buried in oblivion. He made no further inquiries, and he never knew the secret.

They had all separated on that fatal night. Madame had returned to the patient, Reine to her room. The two gentlemen went away together. As Eric was leaving the room, Reine went up to him.

"I have been very bad," she said, "bad and wicked ; but, Eric, say one word to me. It was for love of you that I sinned my sin."

But he turned impatiently away.

"I forgive you," he said ; "but—pardon me—I *cannot* say one kind word to you who have so nearly killed my promised wife."

But she caught his hand in hers and kissed it passionately. The touch of her lips burned him like fire. He never forgot the expression of her face as she raised it to his.

"You will not forgive me?" she said; "you will not speak kindly to me? Ah, well, be it so! Good-by!"

There was not much sleep that night for those who had taken part in that terrible scene. The strangest thing was, that Belle did not seem to have noticed anything particular. She believed implicitly the story madame told her, that Reine had gone in to see her, and had upset the lamp, and the noise of it falling had brought Lord Arncourt and Eric.

She accepted the explanation with the perfect languor and good faith of an invalid to whom nothing seems very strange.

Lord Arncourt did not even return to his room; he was unhappy, bewildered, and anxious. It seemed such a strange, terrible interruption to his life. But he resolved to see Reine on the morrow, and make arrangements for her going away at once.

"I should never fancy that my dear Belle was safe under the same roof with her," he thought. "Poor little Nina, Alice's little child! Ah, me, it has been an unhappy story altogether."

Sir William, who had been ill able to spare the time from his patients, returned to London on the morning following. He made no attempt to see Reine.

"I could do her no good," he thought. "And after seeing her so bright and beautiful, I do not care to dim my memory of her by seeing her in the hour of her adversity and shame."

He paid Belle a farewell visit, and was pleased to find her looking so much better. He held the wasted hand in his.

"You feel better," he said; "I need not ask."

She looked up at him with a grateful smile.

"What has become of the dark presentiment?" he asked,

"It is gone," she replied; "and that, I suppose, is because I am better. I feel like one who has been under a dark cloud; the cloud is passed, and the sun is shining again. It must be because I am better."

"I hope the next news I have from Neversleigh will be your marriage," he said, with a smile.

Then he thought how very fair she was, with that deep, tender light in her eyes.

Sir William went away; and it so happened that Belle never saw him in this world again.

That same day Lord Arncourt sent for Reine; but she was nowhere to be found. She had left a little note for him. It said:

"Do not try to look for me; you will never see me in this world again. If I had been happy, I might have been good; but it is too late for goodness. Do not make any effort to find me. I shall know the quiet ways of peace and content no more. Men in their misery take to drinking; I shall take to something else. I shall plunge into the maddest whirl of excitement that I can find, and

in it forget you all. I should have been good if Eric had loved me ; as it is, I have no hope. In saying good-by to you, I repeat that I am very pleased that I did not, after all, kill poor pretty, loving Belle."

Lord Arncourt read that letter with tears in his eyes. Despite his anger and most righteous indignation, he felt the greatest pity for the brilliant, beautiful girl whose lot in life was so unhappy,—who had doomed herself to so wretched a lot.

He did make some little effort toward finding her, but all in vain ; there was no trace of her. Lord Arncourt was not altogether sorry. It could not be pleasant for her, he thought, to see any of them ; still he would have been far better pleased if he could have known where she was, what she was doing, how she was subsisting, and all about her.

With madame he had more trouble ; she was unwilling to leave him. She begged permission to wait until Belle was well ; she prayed that she might remain, even as the meanest servant in the household—anything, if he would only consent to her remaining. She was attached to him—she was fonder of Belle than of any one or anything in the wide world. Reine had been such a bitter disappointment to her, that she concentrated all her love and care on the daughter left to her—for Belle was, and always had been to her, as her own child.

But Lord Arncourt was firm ; there had been evil enough—there should be no more. He insisted upon

it that madame should return to France. He settled a very handsome annuity on her.

"Let me stay with you," she said. "France is fair France no longer ; my race are proscribed ; there is no longer a rood of ground in that sweet country of the sun that calls me mistress. My friends are dead—nothing remains for me there. And Belle is here. Let me stay."

But he resisted that prayer as he had done all others. So it was arranged that madame should return, not to the land of poetry and song, sunny Provence, but to Paris, where she could in some measure enjoy her life. The only concession that Lord Arncourt could be prevailed upon to make was that she might remain with them till Belle recovered, and for that madame was grateful.

They found that Reine had taken nothing with her. All the jewels, the costly presents that Lord Arncourt had given her, were there ; she had not taken one single thing away with her. The rich dresses, the priceless lace, the costly shawls, the jeweled fans, the dainty slippers were all there, not one was disarranged. She had gone away empty-handed.

But some time after this, when Lord Arncourt was looking over some miniatures that he had by him, he saw that one of Eric Chilvers had been cut away. He felt sure at once that she had done it. The only thing of all the rich and valuable possessions that she had taken away with her was the portrait of the man whom she had loved so dearly, and who had made known her crime. Tears

rose again to his eyes as he thought of it—poor, lost, unhappy Reine!

That same day he called his whole household together, and told them the truth. He said nothing to them of madame's fault—he left them to infer that. All he said was that a great mistake had been made, and that his daughter was not the young lady they had been accustomed to call Miss Arncourt, but the one they had known as Miss de St. Lance. Even then opinions differed—there were many who preferred the imperious rule of proud, willful, capricious Reine to the more gentle dominion of Belle.

CHAPTER LIV.

"YOU DESERVE ALL THE KINDNESS IN THE WORLD."

"I cannot imagine how it is," said Belle, a few days after this, "that Reine never comes near me. I have asked for her until I am tired, mamma. Why does she not come?"

Madame looked anxiously at the pale face; she was wondering when the girl would be strong enough to hear what she had to tell her.

"Surely," continued Belle, "she is not angry with me. I have not offended her. When we were children I used to displease her without ever having the least idea why. I am afraid that I have done so now. Since that night when she came in to me, and I was sleeping, I have never seen her."

Still madame made no answer, and Belle went on :

"Yo do not know how often I dream of her, and she is always in my dreams, saying to me that she is sorry—sorry for what, I wonder?"

"My dear Belle," began madame, "you have, as you know, been very ill."

"I am much better though," she interrupted, eagerly.
"You do not know how much stronger I feel every hour."

"While you were so ill," continued madame, "Reine went to France; she will be there, in all probability, for some time. We did not tell you before, thinking it might distress you."

The sweet face fell, and the sensitive lips quivered :

"Gone! Oh, mamma! I am so sorry, and she never came to say good-by."

"You were so ill," said madame, "we did not like to disturb you."

"If I was so very ill, mamma, how could Reine leave me? I would not have left her; it seems very strange."

"You must remember, my dear," said madame, "that although you were so ill as to render any kind of agitation unadvisable for you, still the doctors told us we need not fear for your life."

"And does she know—have you told her how much better I am? Does she know that I am recovering?"

"I think so—I am sure so," replied madame.

"I must write to her, my hands are strong enough now to hold a pen."

Madame evaded any direct reply.

"Another few days," she thought, "and she will be strong enough to hear it all."

So one morning Lord Arncourt went into her room, and Belle held out her pretty white hands to him.

"I am so pleased to see you," she said. "I have been longing to thank you for all your kindness to me since I have been ill. I do not think any one was ever so kind."

He bent down and kissed the frail, wasted hands, and the white, sweet face.

"You deserve all the kindness in the world," he said ; "and you are repaying it in the best manner possible, by getting well. Belle, are you strong enough to bear a great surprise ?"

"I think so," she replied. "Any surprise you bring me must be agreeable, I am sure. Is it about Reine ?"

Her thoughts were always running on Reine.

"Not all of her," replied Lord Arncourt.

Then, sitting down by her side, he told her all.

Belle was at first incredulous.

"I never knew madame to speak falsely in all her life. I cannot think that she committed the fraud ; and yet, do you know, papa—oh, the word comes so naturally to me—do you know I have strange memories. I have often thought that I remembered your face ; that I remember coming from some pretty home all buried in flowers, a long, long journey with you. Your face was younger then, and stern and cold.

"My dearest child, if you had remembered this, why did you never tell me ?"

"I was afraid you would laugh at me," she replied. "I used to think such strange things—that I had lived before, and had known you in a another life. I dare not tell you all the quaint, strange dreams that I have had."

"But, Belle, my darling, I wish that you had done so ; it would have thrown a light upon what, in some way, is

still a mystery. I cannot imagine what induced a noble, honorable woman like madame to yield to such a temptation."

"I can," replied Belle. "Though I quite believed that I was her own daughter, I could not help seeing that she loved Reine best. She was so fond of her, and so proud of her. I know that her one great dread was always lest she should be too poor to allow any brilliant future to fall to Reine's lot. She used to look at her and sigh so deeply. I think madame loved her better than all the world; the idea of being able to place her out of the reach of all poverty must have been very tempting to her. You may depend upon it, it was all for Reine's sake."

"So I think; but she is such a noble woman. She must have been very wretched over it."

"It was a woman's temptation," said Belle, musingly. "It could not have overtaken a man; yet it seems very strange, for I have always loved and honored you so greatly. I cannot even love you any better now that I know I am your own child;" and the sweet, happy eyes were raised to his.

It was characteristic of Belle that she thought more of the joy and happiness of discovering her father than she did of madame's sin.

Lord Arncourt clasped her in his arms.

"You must love me very much, Belle," he said. "You have your mother's sweet, winning way with you, you have

her generous nature, her loving heart. We shall be very happy, Belle."

She kissed him. She listened with a smile to his tender words, then she looked at him and said :

"Does Reine feel it much, papa? I wish it could be arranged that she should continue to be your heiress and your adopted child. I am quite content with your love."

"That cannot be, dear child ; you must have what belongs to you."

"I know you will make Reine rich," she continued. "You always loved Reine ; you will not let this make any difference to her."

"I think," said Lord Arncourt, with a smile, "that you have always loved Reine. How much you think about her ! What a faithful little heart yours is, Belle."

"She is my sister," said the girl. "It would indeed be strange if I did not love her. When is she coming home, papa? I long to see her ; I long to tell her that this will never make any difference to us. She is so noble, my Reine, with all her little faults of temper ; so noble, that I am sure she would never count as her disappointment that which is my gain. I long to see her, to tell her we will be sisters still, as of old, only that she must have the best of everything. When is she coming back?"

Then Lord Arncourt told the girl, kindly. Holding her hands in his own, he said :

"She is never coming back to us, Belle. You must

learn to live without Reine ; she will never come back again."

Lord Arncourt did not disturb the conviction that he saw had taken possession of Belle. She always believed that it was from angry disappointment at learning the truth that Reine had run away. Belle always believed that the proud, willful, capricious girl left Neversleigh in an anger because madame had told her the truth, and in this opinion she was allowed to remain.

Before long Belle had recovered her strength, and then, to her great surprise, she found herself famous. The story had gone abroad, and had been received with great favor by the great world. It was a new sensation. Such things had been read of in novels, in the romantic annals of the peerage ; but this was the first time that most people had known such a case in real life. Belle was famous. People all remembered the beautiful, proud, dark-eyed girl who for one season had been queen of the great world, and many were the questions asked as to her whereabouts, but by that time madame had returned to France, and Lord Arncourt always said that both the ladies had left Neversleigh.

One thing touched him deeply. Among those who read the story was the Earl of Brandon, Reine's handsome, eager young lover ; and when he had read it, he went at once to Neversleigh, and asked to see Lord Arncourt. He pointed to the paragraph, and with a flushed face, he cried :

"Where is she? tell me where she is. I shall not rest till I have laid my fortune, my name, and my love at her feet again."

"I cannot tell you," replied Lord Arncourt, earnestly; "I do not know. I may tell you, but I would tell no one else, that she left us of her own free will, and we have heard nothing of her since."

"She was so proud," said Lord Brandon; "she could not, I suppose, brook the idea of remaining here after her mother's fraud was known."

Lord Arncourt allowed him to remain in that opinion, and the young earl loved him all the better for it.

"Love is omnipotent," he said, gravely; "I shall find her, I shall search the whole world through till I have found her, and I shall make her Lady Brandon; you will see."

He spent years in his search; he spent a fortune in it, but he never found her. He loved her better than he had ever done any woman living, but his love never prospered. Years afterward he married a gentle, high-bred girl, whose chief merit in his eyes was that her face, in its dark, proud beauty, somewhat resembled Reine's. He married her, but he never gave to any other woman such love as he had given to Reine.

The parting between Madame de St. Lance and Belle had been very painful. Belle suspected nothing; she always thought that madame was going to rejoin Reine in

France, whereas it so happened that mother and daughter never in this life met again.

Madame returned to her fair land of France. For some little time she lived in Paris, but the desire to find Reine overpowered her. She broke up the little home ; she spent the remainder of her life in traveling from one city to another, always looking, and looking in vain, for her lost Reine. They never met ; and madame, the last of the De St. Lances—she who had *feted* kings and had been surrounded by princes—she was found dead in the room of a hotel at Cologne where she was staying. There was no sumptuous monument to mark where she rested, no pomp of words to tell that she who had once been the most beautiful and honored woman in France lay in an unknown grave.

By Belle's wish and desire her marriage was a very quiet one. It took place in May, when the meadows were sweet with clover, and the hedges sweet with blossom. She had regained her health and strength then, but it was easy to see how the loving, gentle heart longed for Reine.

"Am I not enough, Belle?" asked Eric, one day, when she was lamenting that she was to be married without Reine ; "am I not enough for you?"

She held out her hand to him.

"I could not love you more dearly," she cried ; "but I do miss my sister Reine."

"They were married in the sweet breath of flowers ; and Eric, wishing to cheer Belle and restore her lost brightness,

took her to the Scotch lakes for their honeymoon. Lord Arncourt was delighted over the marriage; it seemed to him most feasible and most natural that his daughter and his heir should be united. But all that day—the day of their marriage—he was haunted by the beautiful face of unhappy Reine.

It was arranged that when they returned from their wedding tour, Eric and his fair young wife should live at Neversleigh; “and then,” said Lord Arncourt, “there need be no more parting for us—until death.”

CHAPTER LV.

"JUST WHAT LIFE HAS MADE ME."

They tell, even now, in the gay, sunny city of Paris of the wondrous beauty of the girl who came there suddenly, no one knew from whence. She was wondrously lovely; men lost their hearts by one look at her perfect face. But the same face, beautiful as it was, had a story in it.

She had many lovers, the lady who owned this beautiful face; but she was never known to love. She was gay, willful, capricious, proud, and defiant; she was adorable; men bowed before her as the heathens of old before their idols; she ruled men's hearts with a queenly sway; she bent their will; even the strongest could not stand against her.

She was the most charming of all enchantresses; no one could resist her; yet a man had far better have given his heart to a marble statue than to her. She took all—she gave nothing.

Her smiles were deadliest poison; a glance from her dark eyes fatal as death. A tigress had more pity than she; she spared no man—the young, the rich, the noble, all fell alike helpless in her power.

It was play to her to win a man's heart, to torture it, then to fling it back, laughing in his face. It was play to her to see a man go through all the agony of unhappy love ; she had no mercy, no pity, no compassion.

Men knew what she was ; they saw her victims fall one after another ; they warned each other against her ; and yet, like the moth round the candle, they fluttered and fell.

It was death for her bright, proud eyes to rest upon a man's face—death ; for the glance was sure to attract him ; he was sure to love her, and all love for her had the same ending. She spared no one. Youth, fair promise, fair hope, fair name, all fell before her ; yet those who saw her most often, and knew her best, could tell that all her gayety was forced, her brilliancy assumed ; that her wit was cruel, her sarcasm left a sting. They called her the Queen of Bohemia, and she was proud of the title.

Who she was, where she came from, what brought her to that sunny city of Paris, no one knew. The only thing that could be told of her was, she was a lady, she had been well-born, well-bred, she was accustomed to the forms of good society. Beyond that nothing was known.

She had no mercy. Tell her of young lovers who had a life all fair before them, she would utter some cruel sarcasm, before which those who were speaking to her winced. Talk to her of love, she would laugh the words to scorn. Tell her of happiness and peace, she would scoff at the words.

"You are the most brilliant, the most beautiful, and the most cruel woman I have ever met," said a great Russian prince to her once.

"I am just what life has made me," she replied.

They showed her once the body of a fair-haired young captain, whom love for her had driven mad. She had smiled upon him; she had taken his heart from his breast; she had given him languid glances from her wondrous eyes—and he worshiped her. She took his heart, young, eager, happy, full of fair hopes and promise; she had trampled it under her feet, and gave it back to him broken. He went mad for love of her. And when they told her he was mad, she laughed.

"Others have lost more, yet have kept their reason," she said.

In his madness he slew himself; they showed her his body with stains of blood on the fair hair and the comely face.

"I would change places with him," she said, "if it were not cowardly to kill one's self."

And as she looked at him no gleam of pity passed over the proud beauty of her face.

"Do you hate the whole race of men? and have you some vengeance against them?" a great writer asked her one day, and she laughed a dreary, low laugh.

"If I lived forever," she said, "I could not avenge the wrong I have received."

Yet cold, and fatal, and deadly as her smiles were, cruel as a tigress, utterly devoid of pity and compassion, men crowded around her, and never wearied of admiring her. She had that fatal gift of beauty which some of the wisest men are powerless to resist.

She lived in one whirl of excitement. She knew no rest, no peace. There were people who said she never slept; the beautiful, restless face seemed always expectant of something that never happened. She never entered a church; she dreaded the darkness; she could not endure solitude; she would not give herself time to think. "More! more!" she seemed always to cry. There was no brilliant revel in that world of hers in which she did not take the lead. There was no extravagance in which she did not take the principal part. There was no gayety so wild but that she joined it, yet always the same—cold, proud, and cruel. Men ruined themselves for her sake, and in return they won perhaps a haughty smile, a word so brilliant in its wit, so pointed in its sarcasm, that it was repeated as an epigram ever afterward. She lived in the utmost state and splendor; no queen had jewels more grand. She ate from dishes of gold and silver, she had dresses that cost some of them a small fortune; yet she seemed always to trample her magnificence under her feet; it was less than nothing.

A great duke gave her a diamond that he said had come from a rajah's crown. She looked at it calmly, then laid it down as though it had been a worthless stone.

"You do not seem to value it," he said, half angry to see how coolly she treated his magnificent gift.

"I value a jewel!" she said. "If all the diamonds of Golconda were here, they would not give me one minute's pleasure."

"I wish I knew what *would* please you," he said.

"Nothing," she replied. "There is no more pleasure and no more pain for me."

So through the long brilliant years she lived, and they said no woman living had such luxury, such admiration, as fell to her lot; they said no woman living had done more harm by her pride, her beauty, and her cruelty.

She never softened but once, and that was when a dangerous illness had brought her to the gates of death. Then, when she believed herself to be dying, she bade one of her attendants unlock a tiny ivory box that never left her room.

They brought her a little miniature that lay there, the handsome face of a young Englishman. She took it and looked at it long and earnestly; tears rained down her face; she kissed the picture with a passionate cry.

"Oh, Eric! Eric!" she said, "I might have been good, I might have been happy, if you had only loved me."

But she did not die, and the miniature was replaced in the box. If she fetched it out in the dead of the night, and wept bitter tears over it, no one knew. She recov-

ered, and in a few days was her old brilliant, beautiful self.

"I hope," she said, "that I shall die here in Paris, and be buried in Pere le Chaise."

"What name, my queen, would you have placed on your gravestone?" asked one of her courtiers.

"No name at all," she replied. "Only one word. One word will express the whole of my life."

"And what may that one word be?" he asked.

She looked at him with calm, proud-eyes.

"That one word is 'Disappointed,'" she said; "and it will express all that a volume could not tell."

* * * * *

A beautiful summer's evening. Belle and Eric are standing on the lawn at Neversleigh. Fair-haired children are playing round her, and one of them comes up to her.

"Mamma," says the child, "you are not smiling to-day. What has made you sad?"

"I am not sad, darling, only thoughtful," she replied; and the little one wisely remarked:

"I think all grown-up people are sad when they think. If I were you, I would not think, mamma."

She kissed the child, bidding him go to play. Then Eric turned to her.

"You do look sad, and thoughtful, too, Belle. Why is it?"

"I have been thinking all day of Reine," she replied.

"Oh, Eric, I think it so strange. We lived as sisters ; we loved each other so dearly. Yet she has been gone from us ten years, and we have never heard one word."

"It is strange," he said. "But, Belle, you have many others to love ; you must not let yourself grow sad in thinking over Reine. She is happy, without doubt, in her own fashion."

If he had seen the Queen of Bohemia he would not have said so. Even as he spoke, his conscience reproached him. There could be no happiness in this world for Reine.

"I loved her so dearly I cannot forget her," said Belle.

And he, looking at his wife's sweet face, thanked Heaven that she did not, and never would, know the story of Reine's crime.

THE END.



7/7 HJ

